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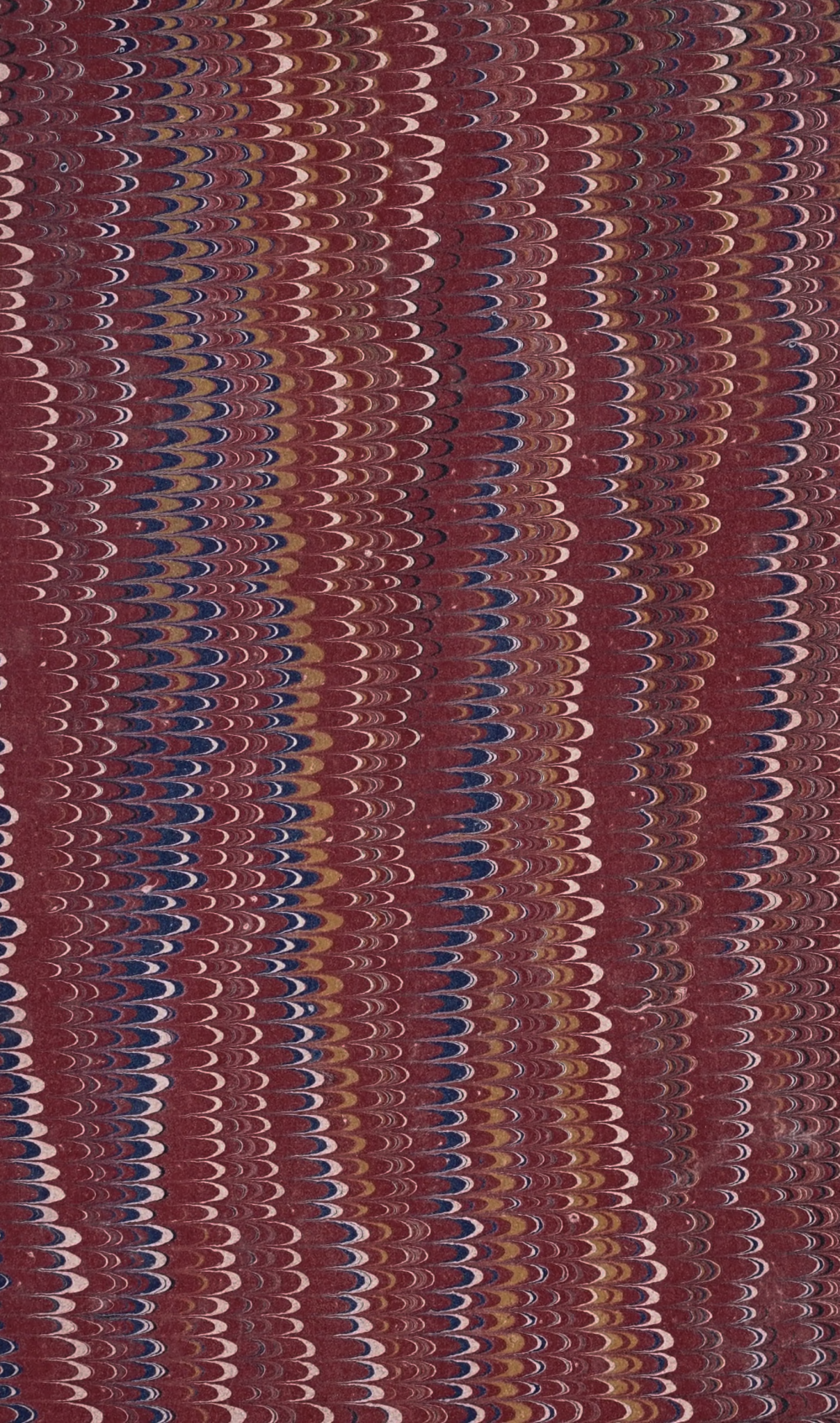
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ROLAND OLIVER

BY

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AUTHOR OF "MAID OF ATHENS," ETC., ETC.

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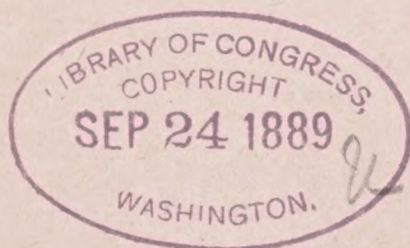
ROLAND OLIVER

A Nobel

✓
BY

JUSTIN McCARTHY, M.P.

AUTHOR OF "DEAR LADY DISDAIN," "A FAIR SAXON," "MAID OF ARMENIA,"
"CARNIOLA," ETC.



NEW YORK :
FRANK F. LOVELL & COMPANY,
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(1889)

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ROLAND OLIVER

CHAPTER I.

THE HOUSE IN AGAR STREET.

ROLAND OLIVER had come back to London to settle there. He had made up his mind that it was time for him to do something ; and he had a feeling that it was about time for him to begin to enjoy life. He had had a good deal of trouble so far.

Perhaps it may be as well to explain how he came by such an odd conjunction of names as Roland Oliver. His father's name was Oliver ; so there is no explanation needed about that. But his mother was a generous and highly-romantic woman, and when her boy was born she resolved that he should be called Roland, and thus sent forth into the world, published in advance as a hero and one of Nature's nobility, by the fact that he bore the names of the two great Paladins—

Roland and Oliver—who are set off in common proverb one against the other. She was always impressing him with the not unfamiliar truth that life is a battle, and that it behoves all true men to quit themselves like heroes. Perhaps it need hardly be said that she was a devotee of Longfellow. Her son, she declared, would never prove unworthy of the heroic names he bore; and she held to it that there could be Rolands and Olivers in the most commonplace ways of life. The boy used to smile sometimes at her enthusiasm, but he liked it all the same; and his mind often went back to those dear talks with his mother—went back in tenderness and sorrow, for she died when he was only twelve years old.

Many years had passed since that first grief of his life. He was now in his thirtieth year; he was not particularly handsome, but he had an expressive face and was well set up; the sort of young man whose clothes naturally fit him. He was apparently making himself very comfortable in London. He had taken a very charming set of rooms in one of the streets out of Park Lane, and had been at some expense to have them furnished and decorated to please himself. He had reconciled the landlady of the house, a good-natured,

active body, who had been a lady's-maid in her time, to his theories of domestic art and the implied disparagement of her theories, and her chimney-ornaments, and her table-covers, by the promise that whenever he left the lodgings the property should be hers free of all charge.

He let himself in with his latch-key one evening in the spring-time and found his lamp lighted, his fire burning cheerily, and the whole place seeming, as it were, to be giving him a cordial welcome and inviting him to sit down and make himself quite at home. A letter on a salver was lying conspicuously on the table ; he took it up and looked at it with hardly half-awakened interest. Perhaps the interest began to get a little more than half-awakened when he saw that the address was in a woman's handwriting. Of late he had had very few acquaintances among women in London. He had been away so long ; he had not been home long enough to have renewed many of his former acquaintanceships. He opened the letter and read :

“ You don't know me—perhaps never heard of me ; but I am the wife of an old school-fellow of yours, whom since that time you always called your friend—I am told. I am the wife of Laurence

Caledon. He is very sick, and we are miserably poor—only because he is sick and can do nothing. Will you come and see him? He does not know that I am writing this; he would be too proud to let me do so if he knew it. Besides, he has said often that when people are rich, like you, they hate to be appealed to by old friends who are poor. Is this true of you? I don't know. At all events, I give you the chance of proving yourself better than others in your position."

The letter was signed, "Mary Caledon." Then there was a not unimportant postscript:

"I was near forgetting to tell you that we live in a couple of little rooms at the top of No. 27, Agar Street, Strand; a trying ascent even for friendship; another excuse for you not to come."

Laurence Caledon! His old friend! Yes, indeed; they had been friends for years. Their fathers had been friends. It was only a love trouble of Roland's which had separated them. When Roland came back to his father, he learned that Laurence had got married and gone to live at Constantinople, where he was practising as a barrister, and doing well, it seemed, at the International Court. Roland remembered feeling at the time a pang of something like envy because of the married happi-

ness of his friend. He had heard that Laurence's wife was young, beautiful, and clever; but that she had very little money. After his father's death, he had tried to find Laurence in Constantinople; but Laurence and his wife were away somewhere, and so the matter dropped through. Roland was always hoping to meet his old friend again, although he could not help thinking, with a little dash of bitterness of his own, that his old friend, now that he was happily married and settled down, would perhaps not care much about him.

And this was what had come of it all! Laurence was in London, poor, broken down, perhaps in actual want. The letter from his wife—how bitter it was and distrustful! He could well excuse that; one of the many curses of poverty to those who have not been always poor is that it makes them so cruelly suspicious. Yet, while the tone of the letter rather repelled him, or at all events called for some mental excusings and explainings on his part, he could not but see that it did show some trust in him too, and that it did, as the writer said, give him a chance of proving that he was not the sort of man to turn from a friend who is down.

It was now seven o'clock. Roland had proposed to dress, to dine at his club, and to look into a

theatre. He thought no more of the dinner or the theatre, but got into a hansom and started in quest of his old friend. Night was darkening down when he reached Agar Street in the Strand.

Agar Street is not a lively or a picturesque or an interesting thoroughfare. It gives one at first the notion that it is a street presenting only blind sides to the eye of the wayfarer. It seems out of the question to think of anybody living in such a place; to associate it with the thought of household fires, and cosy hearths, and the prattle of children's voices. The yellow walls and pillars of a hospital stretch along one whole side of the street; and although no institution devoted to man's benefit can be more useful than a hospital, yet the sight of one of these structures does not, as a rule, tend to brighten a neighbourhood. The other side of the little street was composed of tall, gaunt houses, the lower floors of which were given up to organisations of various kinds—a district School Board office, a private inquiry office, various offices of limited liability companies, an agricultural newspaper office, one or two dismal shops and forlorn coffee-houses.

Roland wandered up and down the street for a while, trying in the semi-darkness to find out the

particular number of which he was in quest. He thought he had never seen a more dreary region. A man in robust health might be excused if his spirits were to give way under the mere pressure of having to inhabit such a thoroughfare. But only fancy being a poverty-stricken invalid there! In truth Roland could not see any signs of life in any of the houses, except the two or three small shops and the windows of the hospital. The other tenements seemed to be places where business of some kind was transacted in the day, and which, after business hours, were left to the darkness, the rats, the black beetles, and the ghosts.

At last Roland found the house. Its lower floor was occupied by a society for the diffusion of something; and there were bell-handles rising one above another, corresponding with and symbolical of the several flights and floors. Some of the bell-handles had names inscribed beneath; the uppermost one bore no name. About to touch this uppermost bell, he stopped for a moment and let the past come back upon him.

Roland Oliver was

Lord of himself—that heritage of woe,

as Byron says. He had no relations—at all events

no near relations—living. His father had been in trade ; had owned a large West End establishment, with the privilege, blazoned on the outside, of proclaiming himself a servant of the Royal Family. The father, who had but the one child, especially desired him to turn out a gentleman, and was strong and severe on the subject of rank and respectability. A Spanish grandee of Old Castile could not have been more entirely filled with contempt for his humble fellow-creatures. His theories had been dinned into the young man's head with the natural effect of making him a theoretical leveller of all class distinctions. The elder generation never seems quite to know how to manage the younger. The natural inclination of the younger set—of all of us when we were younger—is to get into antagonism with the accepted principles and theories which are preached at us by our too wise and self-asserting parents. The elder man in this story ought to have preached to the younger nothing but the brotherhood of man and the baseness of earthly dignities and class distinctions ; then he might have quietly carried his point. He did not adopt such a plan, however, and he failed ; and his son fell in love with the daughter of a music-master who lived

in Clapham. Roland told his father of his love, and the father stormed at him ; the lover would not give way, and so the angry parent turned him out of doors.

The young man's pride and love sustained him. He told all to his love, and told her he was determined to go out and conquer the world for her ; in other words, make a fortune for her. They could not marry while he had nothing and she had nothing ; but give up each other they would not. So Roland turned into money some of the few valuables left him by his mother, and started out for the diamond mines of South Africa. Miss Lydia Palmer, his sweetheart, gave him as they were parting, not merely a lock of her dark brown hair, but an interwoven armlet or bangle of it, which he was always to wear for her sake, and which was to be a sort of amulet for his constancy and his personal safety.

He did not begin to make much of a fortune. If the luck was not dead against him yet it did not do much for him. He went on striving and straining. He had a certain capacity for inventing, and he turned out various inventions meant to be useful in mining work. But the inventions only returned, as Macbeth says, to plague the inventor.

A whole year went over in this way, until one day the European mail brought him out two letters, each of which had some effect upon his life. One was from his softened and repentant father, full of affection, beseeching him to come home and marry whom he pleased, and bring her to live in the paternal home, and adding that the health of the writer had been but poor of late. The other was from his sweetheart, quietly telling him that she was not his sweetheart any more; that she was sure their engagement was a sin, because it was opposed to the wishes of both their parents—which was news to Roland, so far as *her* parent was concerned—and that therefore it must be considered as broken off; and that she would trouble him to return her the armlet of dark brown hair. The meaning of this, as he soon after learned, was that the inconstant Lydia had grown tired of waiting, had lost faith in his conquering the world for her, and had been asked by a clever young lawyer to honour him with her hand. Before Roland got back to England she was married; and oh, what a pang of remorse went through her sensitive heart when she learned that her rejected lover was taken back to his father's house, and was to be his father's heir, and that if she

had only waited she would have shared the inheritance!

This was three years before the opening of the story we have to tell. The father died within a year. He had sold off his business and his establishment, and when dying left his son a considerable fortune. The young man found himself not indeed rich in the vast sense of present day fortunes, but with enough to give to a bachelor a life of luxury, if he cared about it, and to enable him, if he chose to marry, to offer to his wife a nice house in the West End, a brougham, a victoria, and a horse to ride in the Row.

Roland was very sorry for his father; his mind was filled with contrition, although he had really done nothing which called for contriteness. He and the elder man had lived a very happy season together before the father died; and the young man's heart was wounded sorely at the time, and kindness touched him. After his father's death he went abroad, and wandered about a good deal, just going whither chance or caprice might take him. During his wanderings and his lonely thinkings he found a great change had come over him. He had turned from a boy into a man.

At last he made up his mind to go home—that

is to say to go back to England, for it was not now much of a home to him. But he began to think that it was time he should now turn to and do some work in the world. He was not quite clear what the work was to be, but he said to himself: "I have a good deal of money; I have had an education; I have picked up a pretty fair share of experience in various ways; I have read many books, and I know a lot of things that cannot be learned from books; I have suffered not a little, and there ought to be some way in which I could be of service in the world." His heart was much humbled and softened. He had quite recovered from the hurt that had been given him by his false true-love—whom he had only loved because at the time he had to love somebody; but he was not in the least inclined to try another chance of love-making. He did not care much for the society of women; as he chanced to find them they seemed either too young to be interesting or not quite young enough to be idolised. On the whole it must be owned that when he returned to London he was by no means an unhappy young man; such sorrow as he had had was now a source of sweetness and not of bitterness to his heart. After the first few days in London he began to find

life very interesting. The only acquaintances he had in the metropolis were people he had met when travelling; some of them were well worth knowing, and gave him a cordial welcome. It was the spring-time of the year, and spring-time was in the breast of the young man.

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD FRIEND AND THE NEW.

ROLAND rang the uppermost bell and the door was presently opened by a pretty little servant-girl, who seemed almost amazed at the sight of any visitor. She told him that Mr. Caledon was at home, and volunteered the additional information that Mr. Caledon never went out. Then she took his card and showed him the way up flights and flights of narrow, creaking, crumbling stairs, and at last led him into a tiny passage, so small that there was some difficulty in managing to close the door behind him. Certainly the place had not been arranged, even in the original plan of its architect, for the reception of many visitors.

There would seem to be some other difficulty also about his admission. Roland was allowed to remain quite a long time in the narrow passage.

“Only one of the mysteries of poverty,” thought he to himself. “My poor friend’s surroundings are such as he is unwilling to show to outer eyes; he and his wife and the servant are no doubt making some hasty touches of improvement here and there. If he only knew how little need there was for ceremonial with me!”

Then a door opened and the little serving-maid invited him to come in.

When he entered he certainly was surprised; he saw himself in a tiny sitting-room, most tastefully and even elegantly furnished and decorated. It was very small indeed, but nothing could have been prettier than its get-up and its general arrangements. The walls were done in delicate distemper; the ceiling carried out the tone and idea of the walls; the furniture was all white; the mirror over the chimney-piece was draped in soft white; a carpet of delicate, noiseless felt was on the floor; the *portières* were in perfect harmony, both in colour and material, with the carpet and the furniture, just striking a middle and blending note between the pearl-white and the soft greenish-gray; a few etchings in frames were on the walls. It was altogether a sort of *bijou* room. This did not look very like utter poverty. Nor could he

suppose that this was but the wreck of former elegance, the remains of better days ; for the whole get-up was evidently new. " Laurence's wife is vain and silly," he at once charitably assumed, " and has either spent all they had left or run into debt to keep pretty things about her."

One of the curtains was withdrawn, and Laurence Caledon limped or dragged himself slowly, heavily, feebly into the room, leaning on the shoulder of the little serving-maiden. He stopped for a moment, and gazed into Roland's face.

Meanwhile Roland had a chance of surveying his old friend. The old friend had changed indeed. He had been handsome and shapely, and vain of his face and his form. His form was now bent and shrunken, the shoulders bowed, the chest sunken. His face was miserably thin and pale ; his eyes had too much lustre in them. What was his age ? About thirty He might have been fifty, and a very ill-preserved fifty. The shock of seeing him thus changed made Roland silent for a moment. Then he recovered himself, and seized Caledon's white emaciated hand.

" Dear old chap," he exclaimed with a fervour which was all unfeigned, " I am so glad to see you."

Laurence smiled a rather constrained smile.

"Glad to see me like this?" he asked.

"Oh, come, now, you know what I must feel about that; only I am glad to be able to come and see you, and talk to you, and hear all about you, and see what can be done to make things cheerful. I am so much alone in London myself that I am beginning to hate solitude, and I don't know what I should have done if I had not heard that you were here."

"I am glad to see you—really glad," the sick man said, his face brightening a little. "Sit down, old friend." Laurence himself lounged feebly on to a sofa. "That will do, Annie. Now, please, go and say to Mrs. Caledon that she may come in. You only know my wife as a correspondent, I think?"

"Only as a correspondent. It was so kind of her."

"I didn't know anything about it; she only told me just this moment—when you came."

"My dear fellow, you don't really mean to say that you were going to remain in London all the time, and never let me know? Don't you know that I hunted you up in Constantinople for days and days?"

"Constantinople! Oh, I dread to think of

those days; such a contrast to these! Ah, yes; everything looked bright and smiling then. I beg your pardon, Roland, but I almost wish you hadn't mentioned Constantinople. 'A sorrow's crown of sorrow,' don't you know, Tennyson says, 'is remembering happier things.'"

"Poor fellow!" Roland pityingly thought; "how morbid his illness has made him. One will have to be pretty careful what one is saying. There's one subject choked off, to begin with; and I was very anxious to know how they were getting on in Constantinople, and what made them leave it, and how he came to be so much of an invalid. Well, it is not a question of gratifying my curiosity, but a question of how to do some good for him."

"All right, Laurence," he said; "I am sorry I said anything. I am awfully stupid about things——"

"No, no, my dear friend; but I am absurdly sensitive. You shall hear all about it; you shall know my whole story. My wife will tell you; it will please her to talk about it; she has none of my foolish sensibility. See, here she is. Mary, this is my old friend, your new correspondent, Mr. Oliver."

Roland rose, of course, but he did not go for-

ward and offer his hand; something made him leave to her the definition of the sort of terms on which they were to meet. He had a quick eye; he studied her at a glance, and took in every point. The impression she gave him on entering the room was that the room was too small for her. Yet she was not much more than common tall; no one would speak of her as a tall woman. Nor was she of Juno-like proportions; she was rather slender, but very finely formed; short in waist, with length of limb. She had the bust of a Greek statue. Her face was singularly delicate in its mould, with a complexion exquisitely pale; fair is not the word to describe it. As she entered, a slight pink flush came up, as it seemed, behind the pale curtain of the skin, and gave something of the effect of a rosy light inside an alabaster lamp. In short, Mrs. Caledon was a very striking woman to look at; decidedly what one would call queenly, but with the melancholy dignity of a discrowned queen. It was this appearance that impressed our hero at first with the idea that she seemed out of proportion with the tiny sitting-room.

Mrs. Caledon bowed, and hardly smiled; but there was certainly a welcome on her face, which made his position easier for the visitor.

"I knew you would come," she said in a voice that was low and soft, but so sweet and clear that every word floated to the listener's ear.

"Of course I would come; but how did you know it?"

"I can't tell; but I felt certain. My husband has told me so often about you."

"Well, the great thing is that ~~we~~ have got him here," Laurence said, with a resolute effort to be cheerful; "and it does not much matter, Mary, whether we knew he would come or not. We want to hear all about him, and what he has been doing, and what he is going to do. I don't suppose he will much care to hear about our private meditations."

"But I want to hear all about you."

"She'll tell you all, you may be sure. But now this is our first meeting for ever so long, let us talk of cheerful things. How do you like London again?"

"Oh, I am in love with it! I can't get half enough of it."

"No?" Laurence asked, with a sigh. "Well, I used to feel like that once, when we were out there." He jerked his head as if to indicate that somewhere just behind him stood the Constanti-

nople of which he did not care to name the name. "I used to think it would be delightful to knock about London once again. But here I am in London, and what have I to do with London? I might as well be a thousand miles away. I never go out; I never see anything of London but the walls of the houses over the way, and not even these lively objects very often."

"But why don't you get out? It must be awfully bad for you, living for ever between these four walls."

"Of course, I know it's bad for me; of course, I know it is killing me. But what can I do? I can't walk; I am too weak and crippled; and my means don't precisely allow me to keep a carriage."

"But, my dear boy, there are such things as hansom cabs."

"I detest hansom cabs; I detest the rattle, and the trouble of getting in and out, and the trying to make the driver hear through a hole in the roof. Oh, no, no; I hate hansom cabs, and, of course, one couldn't stand a growler; and so I find it better, after all, to stay indoors. Perhaps it won't be for very long," he added, significantly.

Roland glanced involuntarily at Mrs. Caledon when Laurence had said this. She got up as if to

look for something, and disappeared behind the curtain.

“Come, now, Laurence, you said, I thought, we were not to talk of any but cheerful things to-day. One thing only I want to say, now that your wife isn’t here—you know, it must be very bad for her to be always within doors; she does not seem to me to be in good health by any means.”

“The great thing,” Roland said in his own mind, “is to withdraw poor Laurence’s attention from himself by giving him an alarm about his wife. I am sure his malady increases by his constantly dwelling upon it and upon his own general condition. It would be better even to startle him, by telling him frankly that his wife seems out of health and needs looking after as well as he.”

“She not in good health? Oh, yes; she’s all right enough. She always looks a little pale—just like that—but she’s quite well. And she can go out as much as she likes—of course she can.”

“But I dare say she doesn’t like to leave you here alone.”

“Oh, I don’t mind being left alone, I rather like it sometimes. I wouldn’t for anything keep her in if she wanted to get about. I know how

egotistic invalids generally are, and I always do my best not to think of myself."

"Does not the doctor tell you that you ought to go out?"

"Doctor? Oh, I haven't any doctor."

"No doctor? Good gracious! why don't you have one?"

"Well, any sort of a doctor worth sending for has to be paid so much. Two guineas for the first visit, and some of them expect two guineas for every following visit as well. No, my dear fellow, my finances don't run to that."

Mrs. Caledon here came back into the room.

"Why don't you make your husband have a doctor, Mrs. Caledon?" he asked her, bluntly. He was beginning to get angry with her. He set down the fittings and furniture of the room to her account, and he could not understand why she did not insist on taking care of her husband. She knew how unwell he was, for she had written it in her letter.

"I have tried often," she said; "but I can't prevail on him. He will not think about himself; I cannot get him to think about himself. That is why I wanted you, his old friend, to come and see him; at least that is one reason. If he were more

of a selfish man he might have been well long ago."

"Please never mind about my good qualities and virtues and all that," Laurence said, with a softer and more pleasing tone in his voice than it had yet given out. "My old friend here knows all about me, or if there is anything he doesn't know he will soon find it out."

"Well, I shall take very different measures I can tell you. I am going to 'boss this show,' as the Americans say. You shall be looked after by a doctor—and that at once; and he shall be a pretty masterful one, too, who will have his way. And you shall drive out and enjoy the open air, and the days will be growing brighter and warmer every week; and, I say, we'll go and see things, shan't we? I am so glad to have found you, for I was so desolate; and now, old chap, we'll have a good time."

There was something positively contagious about the cheerfulness and the friendly sympathetic sincerity of the young man. It was like the first ray of sunlight, the first breath of the west wind, coming into a room that had long been closed and darkened. Laurence's sad and meagre face actually broke into smiles. Roland gave one glance at Mrs. Caledon

and then turned quickly away. Her eyes were filled with tears. "Come," Roland thought, "I've found something to do at last. For the present my business in life is to brighten this home; and I'll do it, and I am prepared to give long odds that I get him back into good health again."

Laurence, meanwhile, stretched out his hand.

"Your hand, old boy," he said; "I see you are the same dear old boy as ever. Yes, I think it would be nice to go out again a bit; I think it would do me good."

"Why, of course, it would do you good, and it shall do you good, so we needn't talk about that any more. But look here, do you know that it is eight o'clock, and I haven't had any dinner, and I am getting awfully hungry? You haven't dined either, I dare say?"

"Well, we only have a very small dinner, you know, just an invalid's dinner, a cup of tea and a little bit of fish or fowl or something; nothing to give you."

"No, indeed, you are right there; I have a very sturdy appetite. I suppose there would not be any use in asking you and Mrs. Caledon to come out and dine somewhere with me?"

Laurence looked up eagerly as if he were about

to accept the offer, but Mrs. Caledon quietly interposed.

“Oh, no—please don’t ask us; the night air would not be good for him—I mean it would not be good for him to begin his goings out at night. Don’t you think so, Laurence, dearest?”

“Oh, yes, I suppose so,” he replied languidly, and let himself fall back into his chair again.

“Of course you are quite right, and it was stupid of me to think of such a thing. Well, here is what I propose to do: I’ll run out to the nearest restaurant that is good—I know all the places about here—and I’ll tell them to send us in a nice little dinner, and, if you don’t mind, we’ll all dine together here.”

“Capital idea,” Laurence declared, brightening up again.

“Oh, I am delighted!” Mary Caledon said; and the pleasurable thought brought the pink flush into the alabaster again.

Roland glanced quietly at her while rising to start on his mission, and he saw that she was gladdened because her husband was glad.

“I can’t quite make out about these furnitures and fixings,” he said to himself. “If I know any-

thing of human faces and of human nature, that's a true and unselfish woman."

"Now then," he said aloud, "I shan't be long." He took up his hat.

"Why need you go?" Mrs. Caledon asked. "Can we not send the maid? Why put you to the task of going up and down these stairs?"

"But, my dear lady,"—his awe of her was wearing off—"you don't imagine that she would understand how to order a dinner?"

"I never thought about that," she said, with a positive smile.

Then he stumbled down the stairs as fast as he could, sometimes taking, in his energy, three steps at a time.

Roland presently returned, and was quickly followed by a waiter bearing a tray whereon were the component parts of a very nice little dinner, with oysters, and olives, and champagne. The table was soon spread, and they had a very social little meal. Laurence was made quite bright for the moment, and Roland exerted himself to keep the talk going. It used to give him especial pleasure when he could see a smile steal over the pale and thoughtful face of Mrs. Caledon. Ho

fancied he could see that there was in her much capacity for enjoyment, and that she had by nature that most beneficent of gifts, the faculty of finding enjoyment in trifling things. Now it was evident that she was pleased because her husband was pleased. They talked until it was getting late, and Roland became afraid of keeping his invalid friend up too long. So they were to part for the night, and Roland did not say anything to Laurence about coming next day, taking it for granted that his coming would be assumed as a matter of course. He had not yet made any inquiry into the conditions of their life; that would come gradually and later on.

"You had better hold a lamp for him on the passage, Mary," Laurence said, "or he may break his neck down these dreadful flights of stairs."

"Oh, never mind; I shall find my way all right."

"No, no; of course I'll hold the lamp for you."

As she was going to take a lamp off the table she came near her husband, who was lying back in his chair. With a sudden impulse of delight in his brightened condition, she put her hand affectionately and tenderly on his forehead. Apparently

his good-humour had evaporated ; he put her hand quietly away, and said :

“ I don’t know why it is, Mary, but for so nice a woman your touch wants softness.”

“ You ungracious boy ! ” she said, good-humouredly, and then she took up her lamp.

Roland could not help hearing the words that passed in this little incident. When they came into the passage she closed the door behind them.

“ My letter was not a nice one,” she said ; “ you must have thought it very rude and offensive.”

“ Surely I could make allowance ! ” he replied, simply. “ I did not expect a woman under such conditions to transcribe from the ‘ Complete Letter-writer.’ ”

“ No ; it’s not that, but I wrote as if I didn’t believe you would come.”

“ Oh, no, Mrs. Caledon ! Nothing of the kind ; at least I didn’t read it so. You wrote as if you had pledged yourself in your own mind to the belief that I most certainly would come.”

“ You read it that way ? ” she asked, eagerly, and with that same light and sudden flush, making the delicate alabaster of her cheeks to glow for a short moment.

“ I read it that way, certainly.”

She gave a sigh of relief.

“Well, you were right, Mr. Oliver. My husband was always speaking of you—I mean in the old, happy days—with pride and affection. He was always telling me what good friends you were, and how you helped him in everything, and how clever and brilliant you were——”

“Oh, come now, Mrs. Caledon !”

“Yes, he always said so ; I didn’t know, of course. He said you could do anything——”

“Yes ; and I have done nothing, as you see.”

“You have time enough yet ; I am sure he will prove to be right in the end. But I didn’t want to talk of that——”

“No, I should fancy not ; you have something else to think of.”

“I have indeed. But I am so glad you did not misunderstand me, or be offended with my letter. What I want to ask you is about my husband. Do you think he will get better ? Oh, tell me the truth—I mean, tell me what you honestly think. Don’t be afraid ; I can bear anything. And, you see, we have no children ; and it is so easy to bear one’s own troubles when they concern nobody else. Tell me ; do you think he is very ill ?”

“Well, I am not a doctor, although I have

looked into medicine a little; but I should not think him anything worse than heavily out of sorts. But he will have the best advice the best doctors can give. I should rather say he was run down from over-work, or anxiety, or something of the kind. Is there any reason why you should be particularly alarmed for him? I mean, is there anything you know that the ordinary observer would not know?"

"No—there is nothing," she said, with a certain hesitation. "He is nervous and easily shaken, that is all. He was not so always, or, if he was, I did not know it."

"Well, then, I think you may be of perfectly good cheer; for, if there is not something to be known which I do not know, I believe he is safe to get well again. Anyhow, as I told you, we will have the best advice that can be got. Now tell me—like a frank, sincere woman—what can I do for your husband?"

"What are you willing to do?" she asked, passionately.

"Anything that friendship can do. Let me speak like a plain, blunt Briton. I will do anything that friendship and money can do for him. I am rich enough to do anything that could possibly be needed for him, and I am ready to do it.

I have gone through some suffering myself"—one of his weaknesses was to be a little vain of his personal share of suffering, which, after all, was not absolutely unique—"and I am glad to give a helping hand to others."

She stopped and thought.

"Oh, I don't know," she exclaimed, with emotion. "It is so hard to manage; he is so proud and sensitive in many ways. I am so anxious about him, I am in such misery about him—that I am afraid I would take any help that was offered. Oh, pray, don't think too meanly of me if I have come to that; I would take money from you, if you offered it to me—and you would, yes, you would, I know it, you need not tell me—I would take it to buy comforts and rest for him. But if he knew he would be angry, and I couldn't, even for his own sake, do anything that would make him angry."

"But see, you thought he would be angry if you wrote to me, and he was not angry; he was glad."

"Ah, yes; but that was different. He was glad to see you; glad that you came to see him; glad to hear your voice. It is so dull and monotonous and lonely for him here, with nobody to see all the day long."

"Nobody?"

"Nobody but me."

"I should have thought that was an important exception."

"Oh, well; he sees so much of me. Sometimes," she added, sadly, "I could find it in my heart to wish he had never seen me."

"Come, Mrs. Caledon, how could he exist without you?"

"I think all his troubles came from his marriage. He had to work so hard, and he was so fond of me and so proud of me"—the pink colour lighted under the alabaster again—"and he would spend his money to make things nice about me, and then he worked too hard and he broke down. Why, you see, even now—even in this wretched place where he is prostrate—he would spend money in ornamenting and fitting up these rooms, to make them worthy of me, he said. As if I cared for anything of the kind while he is broken down and pining in sickness under my eyes! Well, I mustn't stay too long away from him; but I will light you down one flight." He protested, but she would light him down one creaking flight of stairs.

"Now, you shan't stay any longer. I am coming again to-morrow, and every day, and we shall have plenty of opportunity to think things over and come to some understanding. Meanwhile,

Mrs. Caledon, we are conspirators, you and I, in a grand Guy Fawkes scheme for the blowing away of all Laurence's ailments and for his restoration to health, and work, and happiness."

"We are, we are," she exclaimed, triumphantly. "But oh, how good you are. I always knew, somehow, that you would be. You will come to-morrow?"

"To-morrow and all the to-morrows until our poor lad gets well."

"Good night," she said, and she gave him her hand.

He noticed that her touch had in it something delightfully soft and soothing, and he could not help recalling to his mind with wonder the manner in which Laurence had spoken of the sensation produced by the impress of her hand. She ran up the stairs, and he thought he could see that she had a freshened vitality and vigour in her movements. He was sure that this was due to the renewed hope which his appearance on the scene and his promised companionship had given her, and he felt sincerely pleased and happy. He had got something to live for now, he said to himself. If he could restore poor, broken Laurence and make him, once again, a successful and a happy worker, he should feel that he had done something; and he really did not see

any reason why he should not be able to do that. Six months' rest—complete rest—for the mind from fears of utter poverty, would make Laurence all right again. Just now, poor fellow, he was so tormented with dread, lest his wife should be plunged into want, that her very presence was often a pain and a reproach to him. "Yes," our hero said, "I am sure I should be just like that if I were in the same condition. What stuff it is they talk about adversity being good for people! I am sure it is not good for *him*. Why, I remember him such a different man." So that even on this first visit Roland had got to the length of making mental admission of the fact that his old friend was, to all appearance, a different man from the man whom he thought he knew and was sure he loved in the dear old days, before either of them had fallen in love. "After all, what a lucky fellow he is, with that woman so devoted to him!"

There was new elasticity, fresh vigour in her as she ran upstairs. She was full of hope. Her husband had found his friend again, and all would now go well. She opened the door of the room where Laurence was lying on his sofa, and she looked on him with beaming eyes. He returned her gaze with a sickly smile.

"Well," he said, "we have seen the last of *him*."

"Of him? Laurence? Seen the last of whom?"

"Why, of our wealthy and brilliant friend. Mark my words, he will never mount these stairs again; and I am sure I don't wonder; I wouldn't, if I were he."

"Laurence—my dear Laurence—how can you say such a thing of yourself or him? Why, my dear, he is coming to-morrow, and every day, he says, until you get well."

"Did he say so, really?" And Laurence's eyes were lighted by a gleam of genuine gratification.

"Oh, yes; he is coming to see you every day. He says, he and I are to be conspirators to take care of *you*; and he wants to do everything for you; and he is only afraid of doing too much, and perhaps hurting your pride."

"Did he tell you that, really, Mary?" Laurence asked, eagerly, and rousing himself so far as to lean on one arm and look up. "Well, I do believe he is really a regular good fellow. And so he was afraid I should be too proud to take any helping hand from him?"

"He was; that was the only thing that seemed to trouble his mind. Oh, Laurence, he comes like a Providence."

CHAPTER III.

TWO READINGS OF SHAKESPEARE.

NEXT day Roland sent a West End physician of eminence in his profession to visit poor Caledon. He pronounced him weak, rheumatic, and shaken generally, but with no organic disorder, and not in any danger; not by any means beyond hope of complete restoration to health. What the patient needed for the present was rest of body, peace of mind, and nourishing food. Open air, of course, was declared to be absolutely necessary. For the present there seemed no occasion to leave London; the spring was pretty far advanced, and London in summer was as good a place as any.

Early in the afternoon Roland came himself in an open carriage, and the three drove to Battersea Park. On the way Roland talked a great deal, and so, indeed, did Laurence, who had found reaction

into positive high spirits. Mrs. Caledon sat silent for the most part; her heart was too full of hope and gladness to allow her to talk much. It seemed to her that Roland had come to them like a messenger from Providence indeed. She saw nothing but hope for their future; she felt that under such kindly and strong protection everything must come right with them; Laurence would recover, he would get strong, he would be able to take to his work again, they would have a happy home once more. Perhaps Mr. Oliver would soon get married, and they would all be such friends—the two husbands, the two wives. She had some faint idea that he had had a disappointment in love already; her husband had told her something about it. But he would get over that; probably had already got over it, she thought.

Thinking of these things, her heart full of these thoughts, she lay back in the carriage and sank into a delicious torpor of hope and happiness. How the whole atmosphere of their lives had changed since the day before! What a different being her husband seemed already! His irritability and his way of tormenting himself only came from nervous depression and from loneliness. The doctor had said there was nothing wrong with

him which could not be put right by care and time; and now he would be cared for, and need not afflict his mind any more. She could not help gliding her hand into her husband's as if to assure herself of his nearness. Another time—yesterday, perhaps—he would probably have drawn his hand away, and told her he did not care for demonstrativeness; but now he allowed it to rest within his own, and he smiled good-humouredly at her. The soft breath of the west wind was a delight and a luxury to her; she felt like a happy child again.

“I so love this west wind,” she murmured; “it seems to have all youth in it.”

“Yes,” Roland said; “it affects one in a sort of poetic way sometimes, does it not? One fancies it ought to bring tears to the eyes of sensitive people.”

Looking at her, he was sorry he had said this, for he saw that there were unmistakable tears in her eyes.

She knew that he had seen her eyes all moistened, and she only said simply:

“Yes; but it was not the west wind that brought the tears into my eyes, Mr. Oliver; I am afraid I am not poetic enough for that. My

tears just now are because everything seems so happy."

"I don't think that is quite a satisfactory way of showing one's happiness," Laurence said, almost sharply; and he took his hand away from hers.

"One can't help it," she said. "Mr. Oliver won't laugh at me, I am sure; and if he does I can't help that."

"Oh, no, indeed, I shan't laugh," Oliver said, seeing nothing whatever to laugh at.

They were driving through Battersea Park. Roland stopped the carriage within sight of a pretty little pool.

"I should like to get out, and go near to the water, and look at the wild-fowl, and walk a little," Mrs. Caledon said. "Wouldn't you like to get out and walk a little, Laurence? It would do you good."

"No; you know I am not strong enough for much walking," her husband said. "But you get out, Mary; Mr. Oliver will walk a little with you. I shall sit here and study the wild-fowl from this commanding point of view."

Oliver had already got out, and he helped her to alight; at least, he offered her his hand, but she leaped lightly down without having touched it.

They went near to the pool, and then stood and looked at the brown water. The trees which were mirrored in the pool were leafless yet; the colours were all soft grays and browns. The water-fowl plashed and made noisy demonstrations here and there. The prattle and the laughter of children were heard. Mary felt her heart bound with a sense of sudden freedom and fresh delight. It seemed as if youth had at that moment come back to her.

“Are you fond of walking, Mrs. Caledon?” Roland asked, for the sake of saying something. He had not talked to her much as yet, and he could not rattle on with her as he could with her husband.

“Yes, very. At least I used to be very fond of it; but lately I don’t walk at all. And, as you know, one couldn’t walk much in Constantinople; there’s no place to walk.”

“Did you like Constantinople?” He was glad to find that she at least had no objection to hearing the name of the city.

“I liked it very much at first; everything was so novel, and the waters are so beautiful. But I did not like it so much lately.”

“Laurence did not like it, I suppose?”

"Oh, yes; he liked it very much."

"But he doesn't like to hear it spoken of?"

"No; he has a strong objection to being reminded of it. It will be better, I think, not to say anything about it to him."

She was looking down while she said this, and her manner seemed a little constrained.

"I shall take care," Oliver said. "I am very glad to be warned."

"As he gets stronger he won't mind things so much," she said.

"He will soon get stronger."

"Thanks to you. I have said to him that you come to us like a Providence, Mr. Oliver."

"Who on earth wouldn't try to help an old friend?"

"You don't seem to me like a young London man," she said. They were walking slowly by the margin of the lake.

"Don't I? Well, I haven't been much in London these late years. But tell me, why do I seem to you not like a London man?"

"Because you are not cynical. I have been hearing you talk a good deal yesterday and to-day, and I have not heard you say one cynical thing."

He stopped for a moment as if thinking the thing out, and then said:

"Well, it is not from any set purpose not to be cynical; but somehow things don't impress me in that way. I think there is ever so much good all around us if we would only look at it, and not squint away from it. But I don't mean to go preaching philosophy. I dare say it is very much a matter of temperament or of condition whether a man is cynical or not. Do you know that there are two lines of Shakespeare which impress me more than all the cynicism in the world?"

"Yes! What are they? We are reading Shakespeare now, at nights. I read to Laurence. Tell me the lines."

"Don't you remember what Brutus says when he is dying?

My heart doth joy that yet in all my life,
I found no man but he was true to me."

"Oh, yes; so noble, so magnanimous, the very words for a hero to die with," she spoke with positive enthusiasm.

"Yes; that is what I have always felt. But I want to ask you one or two things about yourselves, before we go back to Laurence."

"I shall be very glad. Laurence knows that I

am to tell you something about ourselves, anything you care to know. He is nervous and sensitive himself, poor boy, especially so now that he is ill. But you can talk to me; I know you mean to befriend us, and I for one am only too willing to be befriended by you if only it can be done."

Then Roland asked her a few questions which she readily answered. They had come back from Constantinople with very little money. Laurence hoped to do something at the Bar and to write for law journals. He had spent far too much money on fitting up their little flat, "done to please me, as he thought." All the money they now had in the world was just one hundred a year — which, being pressed, she hurriedly said was hers—the remains of what had been left her by her mother.

"I think it was a pity Laurence ever left Constantinople," Roland said. But she did not allow him to get any farther.

"Oh, no, no. It was much better for us to leave Constantinople. That was my doing; it had to be done; it was ever so much better. But I would rather not talk about Constantinople; he would not like me to talk about all that, even to you."

"Very well, Mrs. Caledon, quite right; and,

in any case, there is no use in thinking of that now. Well, I have some ideas ; some plans of something to be done—they are slowly maturing themselves in my mind ; some light, very light employment for the present—I think I see my way—and a visit to some nice, warm place. The plan will evolve itself all right by-and-by, I dare say, and I will lay it all before you ; we are fellow conspirators, you remember.”

“He is much better, already,” she said fervently. “The very knowledge that some one is near who will hold out a friendly hand to him, has made a change. He does not feel so lonely. Come, let us go back to him.”

So they had a pleasant day, and Roland drove them home. But he left them, and did not go in. He thought there might seem a want of delicacy if he were to take perpetual possession of them.

“I wish you hadn’t said that stupid thing about the tears in your eyes to-day, Mary,” Laurence said, when they were in their room again.

“Was it stupid ? I didn’t think about it.”

“No, I dare say ; but wouldn’t it be better if you did think a little more about things ?”

“Oh, yes, Laurence, I am sure it would ; but the truth was, I was so very happy, and the happi-

ness was so new to you and me ; and things had begun to look so bright, and it was his kindness."

"Exactly ; but we need not proclaim all about that too loudly. There is a medium, dear, even in gratitude."

"Laurence, I couldn't think so."

"Yes, there is. People don't think one bit the more of you for being too grateful. And, after all, what is there to be in such raptures about, so far? What has Oliver done for us? He has brought a carriage and taken us for a drive. Oh, yes, and he has paid for a dinner. And then, where did he take us to? To stupid, out-of-the-way, vulgar Battersea Park! Why not to Hyde Park?"

"I suppose he thought we would like the quietness of Battersea Park better, Laurence. I am sure *I* did."

"That wasn't the reason. He took us there because he did not want his smart friends in the Row to see him going about with you and me."

She looked with wonder at her husband. She had not seen him in quite such a mood before. She had long learned how morbid he could sometimes be ; but she knew that this was the way of most invalids. Her sweet temper and generous spirit made full allowance for this, and

she would no more have thought of finding fault with her husband for an occasional burst of peevishness in his present valetudinarian state, than she would have found fault with him for being tired or for feeling pain. But the way in which he now talked of Roland Oliver's kindness disconcerted and distressed her. She became oppressed with that terrible sense of uncertainty, which is almost the worst thing about calamity or trouble of any kind. Behold, this thing or that has happened—when we got up in the morning we had not thought of it; who shall say what is to happen next? We no longer feel firm foot-hold anywhere. So, after some unexpected revelation of act or mood on the part of one we love—it shakes us; we ask ourselves what may not come next?

“Shall we read, Laurence?” she asked, gently, feeling a pang of penitence for having allowed distressful or doubting thoughts into her mind at all.

“Don't we always read at nights?”

“Yes, dearest; but I thought that perhaps you were a little tired after the unusual air and exercise.”

“If you had rather not read, Mary, you can say so.”

“Oh, no, I am longing to read.”

“Well, if you are longing to read, I am sure you will read.”

With this genial observation, Laurence settled himself down to be read to by his wife.

It had been their habit, after they were married, to read together every night when they were alone. They had kept this up for a while at Constantinople, but only for a while. Laurence was very much out of nights; he frequented the society of the English Club at Pera, and knew a number of pleasant fellows from the British and other Embassies, and a good deal of card-playing, not to say gambling, went on. His wife had many a lonely night, and read to herself. Times of trouble came, and the break-down of Laurence's health, and they left Constantinople. All through his illness she read to him of nights, when he cared to hear anything read. Perhaps the one consolation she had for his illness was in the fact that now he was always at home with her, and that there were things she could do for him, and that her presence was necessary to him. She took down her Shakespeare—they generally read from Shakespeare, taking any place which came to hand. Last night they had had no reading,

because of Roland's presence. Thinking of what Roland had said that day, she turned to the closing scenes of *Julius Cæsar*. She came to the lines which Brutus speaks just before his death:

My heart doth joy that yet in all my life,
I found no man but he was true to me.

She stopped for a moment.

"Why do you stop, Mary?"

"That touches me so much, Laurence. It gives you the whole character of the man. Think of what a nature that was; he is on the point of death, and yet is made glad by remembering that he found no man in all his life who was not true to him."

"Yes; but that couldn't have been. He must have met many a man who was not true to him."

"But he didn't know it; he didn't believe it; no thought of it ever came into his mind. Because he was so true and noble himself, he saw truth and nobleness in all the world around him."

"That was rather like being what I should call a fool."

"Oh, but, my dear Laurence, Shakespeare's Brutus was not meant to be a fool."

She went on with the reading, and did not further discuss the question of Brutus's imputed foolishness. Laurence for a while kept softly chuckling over his own cleverness and the way in which she was evidently disconcerted. Laurence had always a very exalted idea of his own cleverness, and he liked his wife to see how much superior he was to her in intellect, as well as in knowledge of the world.

In the middle of the lines in which Antony pays his immortal tribute to the nobleness of Brutus, Laurence suddenly interrupted his wife:

"You see, Mary, he is not coming to-night."

"Mr. Oliver? Oh, no; I didn't expect that he would."

"Why not?"

"Well, I suppose he had some other place to go to; and, besides, he might perhaps think we didn't want him every night."

"Oh, that's not it! I suppose the truth is that he is getting a little tired of us already."

CHAPTER IV.

ROSALINE.



FORTNIGHT or so passed off in this way. Roland came to see his friends almost every day. The weather was growing warmer, and they drove out very often, and, to Laurence's satisfaction, drove often in Hyde Park. At least, it was to his satisfaction at first, until it came into his mind that Roland had taken them there, not of his own spontaneous motion, but because Mary had asked him, and, like most people who love to be pleased, Laurence hated to know that things were done merely to please him. Roland had not yet matured his plans about Laurence. He set himself to mature these plans, whatever they were, merely to put Laurence's mind at rest by the assurance that some means were to be found by which he could make his own way once again; but Laurence really did **not** trouble his mind very much on the subject.

A surprise was in store for Roland Oliver. A new and totally unlooked-for figure was coming on the narrow scene of his present story. Mounting up and down the stairs of the Agar Street house, he had noticed, with a sort of languid curiosity, that on a midway floor there were some signs of a new tenancy. There was cleaning-work going on, and furniture was being put in. He was vaguely wondering why anybody should care to come and live in such a place. The preparations were soon made; there was no further movement, and Roland forgot all about the matter. One day, however, as he was coming down the stairs, the door of these rooms opened, and a lady came out. Roland drew back to let her pass.

“Roland!”

The word was spoken in a low, soft tone meant to be at once tender and timid. Looking whither the voice sounded, Roland was conscious of the presence of a slender woman with sparkling, dark-brown eyes—eyes all but black in their colour—and he saw that she was holding out her hand to him; and, behold, he was in the presence of his false true-love of other days! In a glance, too, his eyes and his mind became aware that, although she was not in weeds, her dress denoted

widowhood. A great pang of pity darted through the young man's heart; but it was only pity, or at best compassion.

He took her hand.

"Mrs. Church!" he said.

"Mrs. Church! Mrs. Church! Well, well! But I suppose that is as it ought to be, and I have no right to be surprised. I did you a great wrong, Roland—you see, I must still call you by the name I am familiar with; unless you wish me not to, and then, of course——"

"Oh, no!" he said, a little impatiently. "Call me Roland; of course I will call you Lydia——"

"Thank you! thank you! It will be like old times——"

"I will call you Lydia," he said, "of course, since you wish it. I only forgot for the moment."

"I acted very badly to you," she said, dropping her eyes.

"Never mind; it can't be helped," he answered, feeling conscious the moment he had uttered the words that he was saying something either very ungracious or very stupid.

A quick little flash came into Lydia's sparkling eyes. That was exactly what she was by no means sure of; she was not at all certain that it could not

be helped; in fact she had made up her mind that it could, would, and should be helped.

"You have forgiven me, Roland?" she asked in pleading tones, "I know you have; you were always generous and high-minded."

"Oh yes," he answered, hurriedly, "I forgave you long ago." He did not want any sentimentality,

"I am so glad," she said, fervently. But somehow her expression of countenance when he spoke of this unconditional pardon issued in her behalf long ago, did not seem an expression of unmingled gratefulness and joy.

"But I am sorry," he said—very awkwardly, as is the man's fashion; he was ever so much more embarrassed than the woman—"I am sorry to see—by your dress—I had not heard—I have been so long out of England."

"That I was a widow? Oh, yes. For more than a year. How time runs on! I thought I could not have lived, and yet you see, Roland, I live." She seemed indeed very much alive.

"I am sorry, Lydia—so very sorry—for your grief."

Then again a glance of her eyes might have told him, if he had been in the way of thinking of her meaning, that she was not altogether delighted

with his expression of grief. She would not have minded if it had been merely a formal and polite expression of regret; but it seemed only too genuine. He was then really sorry for an event which had set her free? Still, she did not by any means despond.

“Won’t you come into my rooms and talk to me a little?” she said, almost tenderly. “One can’t talk things out here on this public landing.”

“Your rooms?” he asked in wonder. “Do you live here?”

“Oh, yes; I live here.”

“And what on earth are you doing here?”

“Come in,” she said, hurriedly, “come in. I want to talk to you and we can’t talk here. I have hired a little set of rooms here; I live absolutely alone except for my maid.” She opened with a latch-key the door behind her, and Roland followed her into her rooms. They were not like the rooms of the Caledons upstairs; they were absolutely unadorned, unrelieved by any brightening of artistic taste. A table in the middle of the sitting-room with a shiny covering to it; a gilt clock on the chimney-piece with a simpering shepherd on one side, and a simpering nymph on the other—that sort of thing. There were also shells as adornments

of the chimney-piece. There was a mirror. The chairs and the sofa were covered with the inviting horsehair.

Lydia sat on the sofa and signalled for him to take his seat by her side. He drew a chair, however, and was content with that.

"Tell me about yourself," he said; he really felt only kindness to her; "tell me why you come to be here?"

"Here? Oh, I come to be here, as other people come to be here, because it is central and cheap, when you consider how central it is. I have been left but a very limited income; but it is enough for me, and I don't want to add to it; but I want to be of some use in the world. Yes, I do. You tried to form me, Roland, for some good purpose in life; but you could not succeed—even you! for I was too light and silly and frivolous then. Ah, the real trials of life have formed me since then. I am poor as I told you; but I have enough to live on, so I want to lead a life that shall be useful, and that shall in some measure atone for wrong done and folly."

This was a bold shot and it told to a certain extent. It appealed to Roland. He, too, was bent on doing something in the way of atonement.

"Tell me," he said, "what your idea is, what you propose to do. There is so little allowed to a woman to do in the narrow ways of our conventional life."

She paused for a moment.

"Well," she said, "for one thing, I thought of getting elected to the School Board."

"Elected to the School Board?"

"Yes; of this quarter. That is one reason why I took rooms in this dismal old house."

Up to the moment when Lydia was asked what she proposed to do, she had not the faintest notion of becoming a candidate for election to the School Board. She had never bestowed a thought upon the School Board; but she had a vague recollection of Roland's having, in other days, expressed some views in favour of woman having a mission; and when he spoke of the narrow ways of our conventional life, as regards the career of woman, she thought she had found her cue. So she emerged at once from uncertainty into a definite, published candidate for election to the School Board.

Roland seemed decidedly astonished.

"I never thought you had any inclinations in that way."

"I never had any inclinations that way. I

never thought I had the capacity. As I just told you, you tried to form me and you couldn't. I needed sterner treatment than your kind, gentle ways; and life has given it to me. I knew then, however, silly as I was, that I was not good enough for you—I saw that—oh, I saw that, Roland—and that was why. But we must not talk about these things. Let the dead past bury its dead."

"All this while," Roland said, "you have not told me a word about your past history. I never knew you were——" He glanced at her black and gray colours.

"That I was a widow? Yes; my poor husband died when we had been two years married. He was very good and kind to me, and I tried all I could to make him happy. We were not, perhaps, quite suited to each other."

"Well, never mind about that," Roland said, quickly. He did not want to go into that story.

"Yes, yes; you are right, we will pass that over, and it was my fault, not his; at least, I think so. Roland, you were fortunate, perhaps, after all. But there, I don't want to talk about myself, I want to talk about you. First of all, Roland, I want to know if you are married?" A pretty little blush suffused the innocent counte-

nance of the widow as she put this ingenuous question.

"Oh, no," Roland answered with a laugh. "And I am not at all likely to be. I am not a marrying man."

"No?" And in her mind were formed the words, "But I am very much a marrying woman."

"You are not living in this place, surely? You have no need to come and live in a place like this?"

"No; I am not living here. I come here to see a friend; he is out of health, and down upon his luck, poor fellow."

"It is like you, Roland. You were always trying to do good for somebody. But is it not the strangest coincidence that I should have come to live in this place too?"

"It is, indeed, a very curious coincidence; I should never have thought of seeing you here."

"Goodness! nor I of seeing you. How glad I am; for now I shall hope often to catch a glimpse of you as you pass by. You will look in upon me sometimes, won't you, for the sake of old times; and to show that there is no ill-feeling? I won't keep you now; I know you are busy, and my place yet is not fit to receive visitors; only I couldn't let

you pass. And I haven't got in my piano or my guitar yet, and when I do get them in, you will let me play and sing to you sometimes? Yes, you will."

She smiled bewitchingly. Roland murmured out some words of promise, and gratification, and so on ; and they shook hands, and she allowed her hand to rest for just one little half-quarter moment in his, and she looked up into his eyes and then looked down again ; and so they parted.

Roland, to say the truth, would not have been particularly glad to see his former sweetheart in any place ; and he was by no means glad to see her in this place. He felt compassion for her widowed state ; he was very sorry if she was poor ; but he did not like her little ways at all. She seemed to him full of affectation. Was that really the woman he once loved ? Were these vapid little airs and graces, and sham sentimentalities, charming to him at one time ? It must be so ; but he could not understand it now. She was pretty ; yes, decidedly pretty, and she had a nice little figure ; but he knew she never could interest him again, and he was sorry that they should be brought together in such a way that they must needs meet often. He had for some time been thinking of persuading the

Caledons to move into some other quarters, and was only afraid that Mary Caledon would refuse on the ground that they could not afford to pay more, and that he must not be allowed to pay for them. Now he felt that he really must make an effort. He did not want this little woman to get to know the Caledons.

Is any one surprised that so complete an awakening from his former love should have come about with Roland Oliver? There is not the slightest reason for surprise. I, for one, do not believe that Romeo was ever really in love with Rosaline. He had come to the age when a man must try to be in love with some woman; and Rosaline came in his way and he elected himself her lover; called a meeting of himself and passed a resolution within his own breast that he was desperately in love with her. Suddenly the real woman presented herself, and with her came the real love, and poor Mistress Rosaline's little light went out in an instant. If he had ever gone back to Rosaline he would probably have found her an empty-headed, dull little thing; or also, perhaps, a vain and self-conceited creature, and he would have wondered much how he ever could have taken it into his head that he was in love

with her. This was the way with Roland Oliver. When he fancied he was in love with Lydia Palmer, he was only a boy in years and in feeling. He had come to the time when he could not exist without thinking himself in love with some girl, and he "saw her fair, none else being by," and he was glad and proud to attach himself to Lydia's petticoat-tail. He had nothing to reproach himself with; he had stuck to her; he would have married her; he would probably have made her a very good husband, even after he had found out that she was not a woman he could really love; that she was not *the* woman; and that, therefore, *the* woman could never belong to him. But she had thrown him over, and the shock had wakened him up, and other troubles had come in, and he had been a wanderer; and, in fact, he had utterly ceased to think about Lydia.

It was otherwise with Lydia. Lydia Church had not for a long time been able to forgive Roland for Lydia Palmer having jilted him. Lydia Palmer turned herself into Lydia Church because she thought there was not the slightest chance of Roland's father agreeing to the marriage between Roland and her. The rising young barrister presented himself; he had met Lydia at Bournemouth

in the first instance, and he was taken by her pretty ways and her sparkling eyes, and he made love to her. She thought it all over, and she married him. They had to live in a modest sort of way, but she was happy enough seeing herself the wife of a future Lord Chancellor, or Chief Justice at all events; she was very happy until she learned that Roland had come back to his father's home, and would certainly be the heir of his father's property. Then she became wroth with him, and almost hated him. Why had he allowed her to throw him over? Why had he not insisted on making her his wife? Why had he not run away with her? If he really loved her he would have made her marry him. The expectancy of being a Lord Chancellor's wife was all very well; but then she now remembered, with the chill of contrast on her, that there are known cases of barristers who do not become Lord Chancellors or even Lord Chief Justices; and there was Roland Oliver, with his splendid fortune, real and ready to hand, of which he had positively beguiled her, allowing her to throw him over. Then her life was very dull, her husband was always away at his stupid courts, or at home studying his stupid briefs; and they did not go into society; and in any case she would have infinite

preferred, other things being equal, to be the wife of Roland than of John Church. For all these reasons she was furious with poor Roland and hated him.

Then came a change. Roland went away after his father's death, and hardly anybody knew what had become of him. Poor Church, the rising barrister, not only did not rise, but actually fell. He got ill—his health never was very good—he had worked too hard in the effort to make Lydia the wife of a Lord Chancellor, or at least a Chief Justice; and he died. With the help of his father he had managed to leave her an annuity of just three hundred a-year. She could live decently; with strict economy she could live like a lady. Three hundred a-year goes a long way with a woman. Women don't care about their dinners, they can dine on a Bath bun and a cup of tea. They are, as a rule, no judges of wine; they don't, as a rule, smoke cigars; they don't, as a rule, desire to spend heavily on the turf; neither has the ballet any overpowering attraction for them. Lydia began to find her life of widowhood not by any means disagreeable; she began to go about a little in a certain narrow circle; she began to know people. She was quite determined to get

married again at the first good opportunity; but she thought she had had enough of rising men, she would much prefer a certainty next time. Then all of a sudden she heard that Roland Oliver had come back to London and was going to settle there, and that he was still unmarried. From that moment she had forgiven him all, and had ceased from uncharitable hate.

CHAPTER V.

THE PET DOVE.

MRS. CHURCH had, among her other gifts, a perfect passion for finding out secrets. She had a firm belief that everybody's life enclosed some disagreeable mystery that the owner would not have known to the nearest friend; and to try to get at the key of these secret chambers was a joy to her. It was indeed, in her present idleness, an occupation as well as a delight. She went roundabout ways often to get at knowledge which she might have easily reached by the open, straightforward high-road. She had, indeed, first won her way into the confidence and affection of Roland Oliver by working at him with the object of finding out whether he was not really in love with some other girl. As soon as she learned that he had come back to London, she set herself to watch him and to find out all about him. She had no trouble in

getting at his address, and then she devoted herself to the business of watching him. She had as maid, or as a sort of companion, a girl whom she had taken out of a workhouse and trained up in all her own ways, and she set this girl to hang about the street where Roland lived, and to find where he went every day. It was easy to find. Roland went almost every day to the house in Agar Street. Mrs. Church at once assumed that he went there to see some woman; at all events, that there was some mystery in the matter with which woman was concerned; anyhow she was determined to find out. And then there occurred to her the bright thought that she might not merely gratify an innocent curiosity, but also advance her own determined plans upon Roland's hand, heart, and fortune. Why not put herself directly in his way, so that he could not evade her? Why not put herself often in his way? Why not take up her quarters in the very house which sheltered his mystery? That would be a delightful adventure, even if it should come to nothing better; and Mrs. Church, glancing complacently into her mirror, told herself that she thought she could make it come to something much better. There were a good many vacant rooms in the Agar Street house; Mrs. Church took three of

them, and settled herself and her maid there in the character and form of interesting beneficence with limited means.

"Cora," Mrs. Church said to her maid the day after she had talked with Roland, "I want to find out who the person is that Mr. Roland goes to see here. Go and find out for me who are really living in this house; who live here night and day; I don't care about the office people who go away after hours."

"Yes, ma'am; I'll find out, ma'am."

Cora went on her quest, and was not long absent.

"Please, ma'am, I've seen the housekeeper, and she says there ain't any one who lives in the house but ourselves, and herself, and an old bachelor gentleman who hardly ever goes out, and a gentleman and lady—leastways a party and his wife—who live at the very top."

"A man and his wife?"

"Yes, ma'am—leastways the housekeeper supposes she is his wife. She don't know much about them. 'They keep themselves very much to themselves,' she says."

This was delightfully mysterious. These, of course, were the people Roland used to visit so

often. This was the invalid friend—and there, to be sure, was the invalid friend's wife.

“Cora,” she said, in a melodramatic tone, “I must get to know that man and that woman—especially the woman.”

“Yes, ma'am ; certainly, ma'am,” was the complaisant answer of Cora. By-the-way, it should be mentioned that Cora was a name entirely of Mrs. Church's own choosing for her maid, whose baptismal appellation was Susan.

“How to begin the acquaintance, Cora ? ”

“Perhaps if I was to go up and ask to borrow a little tea, ma'am, or sugar——”

“Cora, you have no invention ; you are absolutely lacking in originality. You can execute orders well enough ; but you cannot devise any plan.”

“No, ma'am,” was the answer of the undisturbed Cora.

“Can't you see that that would be a pitiful commonplace sort of thing—going to borrow some tea, like people in a common lodging-house ? That wouldn't impress. I want to make an impression at the very beginning. Now if they only lived below me and not above, ever so many things might be done. I might fall in a faint just as we were passing the door, and then you could rush

in there and crave for help ; and I should have to be carried in. But one can't go up to their door to faint."

"No, ma'am."

"No ; it's very unsatisfactory," Mrs. Church meditated ; "even an alarm of fire would be open to the same objection. Nobody would run upstairs on hearing an alarm of fire."

"Only she might run downstairs, ma'am."

"But then she would run into the street, you silly child—she wouldn't stop here to talk with me. An alarm of fire would be a very interesting thing in many ways, if we could only make it serve. It might be in the night ; I should have on one of my prettiest nightdresses. But then I don't see how we could make it work ; it would be found out in a moment that there was no fire."

"Unless we was to set the house really afire, ma'am."

"Ridiculous ! Why, we might be burnt to death ; or it might be found out that we had done it, and we should be put in prison for I don't know how long. No, Cora ; you must let me think this out for myself. An alarm of a burglar, and you and I to rush up and implore the protection of the man?"

"Bless you, ma'am, he's quite an invalid; he couldn't protect us against a mouse, not to say a burglar."

"But we are not supposed to know that. No, it wouldn't do. People hate to be disturbed out of their sleep; it would make a bad impression to begin with. It must be done some other way; some newer and better way. I'll think it out, Cora; I'll think it out."

"Yes, ma'am."

So Mrs. Church sat down, puckered her brows, set her wits to work, and thought it out.

The result of her thinking it out came soon. She nodded her head, opened her eyes, smiled, and laughed to herself; then jumped up, shook her skirts, and prepared for action. She threw over her head and shoulders a picturesque lace shawl, which, after much pulling and re-arranging, she got into proper artistic form, and then studied herself complacently in the glass. "That will do," she said.

"Cora!" she called to her maid. "I have got the idea, and a very pretty one too. You could never have got hold of it, or anything like it, my poor girl."

"No, ma'am," was the answer of the imperturbable Cora.

Cora was not jealous of her mistress's genius. She had seen that the great majority of the brilliant ideas failed to come to anything satisfactory in practice, and that some of her own cruder and more homely notions had been called in to do duty instead.

Mrs. Church was in luck. The outer door of the Caledon rooms stood partly open; the servant had just gone out for a moment or two. Lydia briskly entered the little passage, out of which three doors opened. Choosing by guess-work, or by instinct, she tapped rapidly at one of the three, and then, without waiting any further, she half-opened the door and looked in. She was right. These, no doubt, were the people she wanted. A languid, invalid young man and a young woman—of course, his wife. The invalid was reclining in a chair; the wife had apparently been reading something to him. At the sound of Lydia's voice she rose up, a book in her hand.

Lydia put on the prettiest air of perturbation. She spoke in stammering words, almost breathless with shy eagerness and anxiety, and with eyes looking everywhere.

"I beg your pardon; I am afraid I am intruding; but I want to ask you to do me a favour, just a little favour."

Laurence was puzzled and annoyed at this unexpected visitation. Like many men who rather look down upon their wives and women in general, he had a way of apparently turning to his wife for an explanation of everything, as though she were an omniscient creature. He therefore now looked sharply, not at the intruder, but at Mary, as if to ask, "Who is this woman? Where does she come from? Why does she come?"

Mary rose, and with all her natural sweetness of manner asked the lady to come in and explain herself. She very much hoped in her heart that the visitor would make her stay and her story short, for she feared that Laurence's humour might lead him to show signs of impatience.

"Only this: if you would kindly open your front windows for a little—oh, I see they *are* opened already; but I had better explain myself all the same. I have a pet dove—oh, such a sweet little creature—that I am so fond of. I never let him fly since I came to live here until to-day, and he has not come back yet, and my windows don't open on the street, and I am afraid he may not know how to get to me; and I have asked all the other people in the house just kindly to leave a window open for a short time until my little pet comes back."

All this was said rapidly, and with a sweet tremulousness, and with many quick, shy glances at Laurence. Mrs. Church saw in an instant that the husband was the person to be won over here.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Caledon said, "we shall be delighted. Your little bird shall be very welcome to us if he will only come in through these windows, and he shall be restored to you."

"Perhaps the lady will take a seat," Laurence said graciously. The rapid and shy glances had not been altogether thrown away on him.

Mrs. Church saw this with pleasure; but, to say the truth, she was a little disconcerted by Mary Caledon's looks and graceful presence.

"She is beautiful," the little woman said to herself, candidly and angrily. "She is much too beautiful. I don't wonder that Roland comes here so often." She thanked Laurence with a bend, and a winning smile shot straight at him this time, and she sat down.

"Then you live here?" Mary asked. "We are neighbours?"

"Yes; I have been living here for a short time; but I ought to introduce myself. My name is Lydia Church—Mrs. Church—I am a widow, as you see" (she directed attention to her mourning

colours), "and I am not very rich, but I want to be in the centre of things, and I found out this place and have taken rooms on a lower floor, where I live with my maid and my dove."

"This is my husband," said Mary. "Mr. Laurence Caledon; I am Mrs. Caledon."

"Oh, yes; I know something about you both already. We have at least one friend in common."

"Indeed," Mary said, much surprised. "We have hardly any acquaintances in London."

"Oh, this is more than an acquaintance—it is a friend—it is Mr. Roland Oliver."

Laurence looked surprised and almost incredulous.

"Indeed," he said. "Do you know Roland Oliver?"

"Truly," she replied, "I might answer as the Americans do, by asking do I know any one else? Oh, yes; I have known him for many years. We were great friends once—before I married. I had not met him for a long time—he was away and I was in grief—until the other day, below stairs. He told me he had been to see you, and he talked to me ever so much about you both, especially about you, Mrs. Caledon, as was indeed but natural."

Laurence's eyes sent forth an unwholesome gleam.

"Mr. Oliver is my husband's oldest friend," Mary said, simply. "And he is the best friend we have in the world."

"Oh, so very enthusiastic," Mrs. Church thought. "Yes; I can well believe that he is the soul of kindness," she said aloud. "I knew him well once—now we are friends again. Well, I am glad you know him, too, for the common friendship ought to be, at least, a bond of acquaintanceship between you two and me, if you will allow me to put myself forward in such a way."

Mary was greatly afraid that Laurence would do what she had known him to do more than once before; bluntly declare that he and his wife did not make any new acquaintanceships. On the contrary, however, he relieved and gratified her by expressing in the most courteous manner a hope that the little lady and they might be good neighbours; that his wife would be delighted to see her, and as he was pleased, Mary really was glad.

"How delightful for me to have such neighbours," Mrs. Church exclaimed, fervently. "It was my good star, surely, that lighted me the way to this house; and it looked so dreary and ghostly

a place when I first came. But what exquisitely pretty little rooms! How delightfully fitted up! That is your taste, I am sure, Mrs. Caledon. I can see the imprint of your hand in that—and that——”

“No, indeed,” Mary said, with a smile, “it is all my husband’s doing; he has much better taste than I have.”

“My wife does not much care about artistic decorations, in fact,” Laurence said; “I am afraid I got it all done to please myself.”

“Indeed! I am so surprised; I mean that Mrs. Caledon should not have artistic tastes. Why, she is a work of art herself.”

“Do you mean that I paint or get myself up?” Mary asked, with a little touch of humour accentuating her smile.

“Oh, please, Mrs. Caledon, don’t think of such a thing. Oh, no, no—never. One has only to look at you! That tint on the cheek is beyond the reach of art. What I meant was that you look so like a picture or a statue, do you know—if I may be excused for saying such a thing bluntly out—I never saw a better-assorted pair; both so handsome, and both a little delicate. I am not paying a compliment; I am only saying what I think; it is a way I have.”

It is certain that a slight flush came on Laurence's cheek. It was so long since any woman had said a pretty thing to him—except his wife, of course; but then, men don't always care much for pretty things said by their wives.

Mrs. Church thought that now was the time to retreat, and leave a favourable impression behind; on the man at least. She did not care twopence what impression she made on the woman; and, besides, had got an idea that somehow Mrs. Caledon and she would not get on. So she rose and shook out her skirts daintily.

"Well," she said, "I must not intrude on your time any longer. I am so glad to have broken the ice. I shall expect—at least I shall ask and crave for a return visit."

"My wife will be delighted——"

"And you too, Mr. Caledon—you too, I hope? I know that gentlemen are not fond of paying calls; but in the same house, you know. And it seemed such a lonely house; and I have no children."

Then she glanced quickly round the room, as if to see whether there were any evidences of the propinquity of children.

"Nor we," Mary said, softly. "We never had. We are alone."

"All the greater reason for our being companionable, we three childless creatures," Mrs. Church said. "Well, I shall look to see you very soon; and you, Mr. Caledon, too—remember."

"I shall be only too happy," Laurence said, with something like an approach to warmth in his tone.

"I hope your little dove will come back," Mary said, as they were parting. Lydia had forgotten all about the dove.

"My dove? Oh, yes, thank you. I don't believe he could live without me—or I without him, indeed, or I without him. Good-bye, Mrs. Caledon." She smiled sweetly, and tripped downstairs.

She entered her own rooms in an exulting mood of mind. She had begun well, she thought, and she would take good care to improve her opportunities. She had made out a whole story for herself. Roland was caught by the fascinations of that pale, very handsome, intellectual woman, who was of course drawing him on to get money out of him. Lydia was not much disturbed at the thought. Roland could not marry Mrs. Caledon, and she knew he was not given to amorous intrigue of any kind. She would find out gradually


whether Mrs. Caledon was inclined to assist her in trying to get Roland to marry his old sweetheart. If she was so inclined, then she and Lydia might work together; if not, Mrs. Caledon must be got out of the way, and out of Roland's mind somehow. Lydia had not quite satisfied herself as to whether the husband was rogue or dupe, but she would soon find out that; and the best way to get at him was by flirtation; of that she was quite sure. If there were no other motive, she thought, it would be very nice to make Mrs. Caledon jealous. There was no tribute more delightful to Lydia than the tears of jealous wives, especially when the wives were handsome.

She called for Cora.

"Cora, you know the bird-fanciers' shops in St. Martin's Lane? Go quickly and buy me a dove there. Mind, a white dove; and, remember, if any one says anything to you about it that I have had that dove for a long time, and that he is my especial pet and playmate, and the companion of my solitude—that sort of thing—you know."

CHAPTER VI.

“HAVE DONE WITH THE HEROICS.”

OME weeks passed, and it was summer. Things seemed to be going on just the same with the Caledons and Roland; but they were not quite the same in reality. Roland came nearly as often as ever; and the three went out for drives in the Park, or to Richmond or Greenwich, where now, in Laurence's bettered health, they were able to stay and have nice little dinners, which Laurence enjoyed immensely, and which Roland enjoyed likewise, and which Mary would have enjoyed if she could. There was much talk of an expedition to some delightful place abroad, which they three were to make in the autumn. All this surely ought to have been very pleasant for Mary. Yes, a little dinner at Richmond or Greenwich was very pleasant; the talk of the three in the twilight was often delightful; Mary felt herself “coming out” as she had

never come out before, about books and plays—they often went to the play now—and men and women and foreign countries, and even creeds and theologies. But toward the close of the evening came the bad quarter of an hour for Mary. It was not the ordinary diner's bad quarter of an hour. It came when the bill was presented, as a matter of course, to Roland; and Roland, as a matter of course, paid it.

"Laurence, dear," she said one evening when they were alone, "is it right to let Mr. Oliver pay for all these drives and dinners?"

Laurence looked up from his invalid chair—he still lounged in his invalid chair.

"What on earth would you propose to do?" he asked, in amazement.

"Couldn't we pay now and then, even?"

"What an idea! That *is* like a woman. Why, do you know what one of these little dinners costs?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, reddening. "I had better not know."

"Why, that little dinner yesterday must have cost five or six pounds. Such splendid wines. Why, it's seventeen and sixpence a——."

"But, Laurence, is it right that his nonev

should be spent upon us—that we should be paid for in that sort of way?"

"Why not?"

"Isn't it degrading?"

"Oh no, not in the case of a friend like him. He has nothing to do with his money; he enjoys spending it, and he tells me he hates dining alone. Oh no, it's all right."

"I feel it a degradation."

"I don't. And I do wish, Mary, you hadn't looked so sulky last evening."

"I wasn't sulky, dear; only I felt pained, somehow, when the waiter presented the bill to Mr. Oliver quite as a matter of course."

"Wouldn't be of much use his presenting it to you or me, would it?"

"No; and that is what pains me. Why accept these dinners?"

"Oh, I dare say you want to deprive me of even that little enjoyment! Oliver must have seen that you were out of humour last night. He must have thought you in a devil of a temper. I dare say you wanted him to, so that he might not ask us any more. Well, you see he is not coming to-night. You have frightened him away."

"Come now, Laurence, dear," Mary said, with

unconquerable good temper, "you know he told us before we sat down to dinner, that he had an engagement for to-night, so it couldn't have been my fault, you see."

"He's not coming to-night anyhow; and we needn't argue about it, Mary."

"No, dear. Would you like me to read to you?"

"I wonder is Mrs. Church in her rooms? Perhaps she would come up and talk to us. I like her talk; it is bright—bright. It freshens one up."

"Shall I send Annie to ask if she is in?"

Mary felt disappointed, but did not mean to show it.

"Yes, dear; send Annie. Unless you would rather not have Mrs. Church."

So Mrs. Church was sent for; and she came, all smiles, and grace, and artless coquetry. But she was disappointed when she saw that Roland was not there; and much vexed—though she would not show her vexation—when she found that Laurence, before sending for her, knew he was not to be there. She had begun to suspect that Roland tried to avoid her. That she did not much mind; she thought she could win in

the end, and she had counted on obstacles and difficulties. But she did not by any means relish the idea of being sent for merely to entertain Mr. Caledon, and, in order that her evening might not be wholly thrown away, she set herself to finding out all that she could of that gentleman's past career. She made out something to go upon; she made out that he had lived in Constantinople, and did not like to be reminded of the fact.

"Eleven o'clock!" she suddenly exclaimed, jumping from her chair. "I had no idea it was so late. How we have been talking! I have enjoyed myself! So kind of you to send for me!"

"May we send for you again?" Laurence asked sweetly.

"If you don't—and very soon—I'll come without being sent for," she answered.

That, indeed, was what she fully meant to do.

Mary Caledon found her mind occupied—sadly and painfully over-occupied—in trying to understand her husband. There were times when she could not make up her mind as to whether he loved Roland or detested him. To her he spoke alternately in highly-wrought praise of his friend and in bitter disparagement of him. He did not seem to be able to do without Roland's company; he

was uneasy and distressed if Roland allowed a day or two to pass without coming to see them. He occasionally grumbled at her for not being, as he said, "nice enough" to Roland. Mary admired Roland, and appreciated him to the full; but she found the whole situation becoming very hard to bear. What especially troubled her was that Laurence seemed quite content to sink into a condition of absolute dependence. He was much better in health now, and she thought he would be better still if he would work a little every day at some light literary task; something that would show he was able and eager to make an effort on his own account. She could not endure the idea of his thus settling down to live on the bounty of his friend, and she was determined it should not be, even if she had to speak to Roland himself on the subject. She was conscious that her mind was becoming morbid, from thus continually dwelling on the one subject; and she began to have a miserable feeling that her respect for her husband was crumbling away. From this thought she started at first in horror; but it would not go from her; it followed her like the "frightful fiend," that "close behind doth tread," in "The Ancient Mariner."

Was she getting a little jealous of Roland? Certainly it vexed her to know that every day Laurence was looking out eagerly for his coming. It vexed her to think that she was less necessary to her husband's life than she had been a short time ago. Then she was angry with herself because she could allow such ignoble ideas to enter into her mind. Perhaps this made her all the more angry with Roland, because he was the cause of the ideas having any existence at all. She could discover nothing in Roland which was not healthy, manly, and true. Such an influence ought surely to be only for good, wherever it came; and yet it did not seem to do much good for that little household—in the spiritual sense, that is to say. Then she did not see where it was to end. Was Laurence to live on, and on, as a dependent on the charity—on the generosity—of his old friend? She ventured once to suggest to her husband that, as he was so much improved in health now, he might make some attempt at literary work. But, although she only whispered the suggestion ever so gently, Laurence grew angry, and said he supposed she wanted him to throw himself back into sickness again; and expressed a wonder that any woman should be so entirely without sympathy, and pro-

ceeded, indeed, to make disparaging remarks on the sex in general. Then she made up her mind that she would try to do something herself in the way of earning money; and she began to consider what there was which she could do, and which any one would care to pay for; the result of which resolve was that she had something which she must not tell to Laurence, and about which she must consult Mr. Oliver.

Was she also a little vexed in her inward heart because Roland was so strong and healthy in mind and body; so manly and so gentle, and in every way so much of a contrast to her husband? Sometimes she allowed herself to think of this, and then it seemed a disloyalty and a treason to her husband, and she tried to drive it off by telling herself that probably all men were very much alike if one only knew. Laurence's faults were not great; they were defects of temper and of manner only, and, perhaps, if she knew other men well, she might find that they were no better than he. For example, she saw that, while Roland was present, Laurence's manner to him was always the same. He always showed the most friendly and cordial welcome to Roland; always spoke to him in the same friendly and even affectionate way. Well, but if Laurence

could be so different a man in Roland's presence from the man he sometimes showed himself to be in Roland's absence, who was to assure her that Roland too might not have his varying moods, and show only his bright side to his friends? On the whole, her life was not made more happy of late. Many of her most fervent prayers had been granted. Things had come to pass, the happening of which she would have thought a few weeks ago would have been all she wanted. Her husband was getting better; he was in a fair way to get quite well. He had found a friend who was able and most willing to help him. He was no longer alone and uncared for, and yet she could not hide from herself the truth that life was little the brighter for her.

Lydia, for her part, did not find her schemes advancing in anything like a satisfactory way, or, indeed, advancing at all. She began to tell herself resolutely that it must be Mary who was crossing her path and keeping Roland from her. She had an inward conviction, somehow, that Mary saw through her, and disliked her. She was sure Mary talked to Roland about her, and put him against her. She was wrong of course; Mary had never said a word to Roland in disparagement of the

woman to whom she knew that he had once been engaged. Roland had never spoken to her of Mrs. Church. But Lydia knew what she would have done herself under such conditions, and she assumed that what she would do every other woman would be sure to do.

The day after her evening with the Caledons, her faithful Cora announced to her that Mr. Oliver had just gone up the stairs. Lydia's room did not look on the street, and Cora, therefore, was kept very constantly on the watch.

Lydia was delighted. "I'll go up," she said. "I'll give them twenty minutes, and then I'll go up and make one of the party. I'll call on dear Mrs. Caledon—to be sure."

Tripping lightly up the stairs, at the end of the appointed time, she nearly ran into the arms of Roland Oliver. He was standing in the lobby above Lydia's room and below that of the Caledons. Mary Caledon was with him, and they were in deep converse. Roland looked vexed at being interrupted. The light flush came into Mary's cheek. In one moment Lydia's eyes flashed fire.

"Oh, I am sure I beg your pardon," she exclaimed. "I do hope you will excuse me; I didn't know."

"Why should you beg pardon, or make any excuse?" Roland said, with somewhat forced good-humour. "This is the public thoroughfare, one might say. At all events, you have just as good a right to be here as Mrs. Caledon, for it is exactly midway between your rooms and hers; and you have a better right to be here than I have, for I don't occupy any part of the premises at all."

"Oh, I don't mean that; but I don't want to disturb people who are engaged in confidential conversation. One seems so intrusive."

"You are not intruding in the least, Mrs. Church," Mary said, now quite composed. "I was only asking Mr. Oliver's opinion about a sort of matter of business; and I don't mean to keep him very long."

"Well, I was going to see you," Mrs. Church said; "and as I must be a little in your way here, in this little mite of a passage, I'll run up and have a chat with your husband—if you don't mind."

"He will be delighted!" Mary said. "He always likes to talk to you, Mrs. Church."

"So nice of you to say so!" And she nodded, smiled, and ran up the stairs.

"Laurence really does like to talk with her, ever so much," Mary said; as if to relieve herself from the imputation of a sort of insincerity.

"I used to like her once," Roland said. "I once actually thought I was in love with her."

"Yes, I know."

"I don't think now that I was in love with her, even then."

"Oh, no! Of course not!"

"Why 'of course not'?" he asked, turning on her.

"Well," she answered, quite simply and naturally, "because she is too flippant. She hasn't depth enough for you."

"All right! Never mind about her. Come back to yourself."

So they resumed the subject on which they had been speaking when they were interrupted by Lydia.

That lady meantime had invaded Laurence's solitude. He was only too delighted that it should be thus invaded. He was pleased to believe there was a sort of flirtation springing up between Mrs. Church and him. This time, however, Mrs. Church did not seem in a mood for flirtation. Her eyes flashed malignly.

"I appear to have disturbed such a charming confidential *tête-à-tête*," she said, "between Roland Oliver and your wife."

Laurence knew all about the *tête-à-tête* in the lobby. It was suggested by him. It had come to be an understood thing that any little affairs of business should be talked over by Mary and Roland, so that the nerves and the sensitiveness of the convalescent should be spared. The first landing below was usually the scene—the council-chamber of these conferences. Roland often revived his old jest about Mary and himself being conspirators; and she retailed it to Laurence, whom it never failed to please. Yet his face grew dark when Lydia spoke her malign words.

"I knew all about it," he said, not very sweetly. "I told my wife to go and ask his advice about something."

"Oh, yes! Of course you knew it; and it's all right. But some husbands would be so jealous. Absurd of them! He's a very attractive sort of young man, to be sure. But, good gracious! if a young married woman couldn't talk alone to an attractive young man for a few moments what would become of us all? Only, I am so glad you are not like most other British husbands.

Where did you learn to trust your wife? Was it in Constantinople?"

Laurence frowned, and grew red, and almost trembled. "What the devil," he thought, "did the woman mean by talking about Constantinople? Did she mean anything?" For the moment he hated her.

"He was in Constantinople," she said.

"He! Who?"

"Who? Why, Roland Oliver, of course; whom were we talking about? Did he see *her* there?"

"No; he didn't. Why do you ask?"

"I don't quite know. You don't ever seem to like to talk about Constantinople. I thought perhaps there might have been a row."

"I don't even know what you mean," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't think I know it myself," she replied, returning to her artless, coquettish way. "Oh, here is **your** wife! Doesn't she look like a picture? Could any one wonder if—— My dear Mrs. Caledon, I have been boring your husband to death with my chatter; yes, I know I have."

Mary glanced at her husband, and saw with some surprise that he really did seem put out.

When Mrs. Church had gone, Mary hastened to

give out the good news which she had been burning to tell her husband.

"Laurence, dear, I've had such a nice encouraging talk with Mr. Oliver. He quite falls into my views—into *our* views, I mean."

"Oh, falls into *your* views, does he?"

"My views and your views, dear—weren't we quite agreed? He does not see why I should not try some literary work. He thinks the mere working would do me good, and he doesn't see why I might not get some things accepted somewhere. He knows some editors of magazines, and will ask them about it. I was so much afraid he would discourage and depress me, and say that women oughtn't to try such work. But, no; he was quite encouraging, and so sweet."

"You seem quite excited about it, Mary."

He certainly did not seem excited, or, at all events, exhilarated. His face was black with gloom.

"Of course, he would be sweet to you," he began, and then he suddenly stopped.

"You don't seem pleased, Laurence."

"Oh, yes; I am pleased. I feel as much pleasure as the matter calls for. It's all in the air as yet."

"But it will come to something. Yes, yes ; if I can only do it," and she blushed a little at her own anxiety, "and he says he thinks I can. Anyhow, it will not be any fault of his if I cannot, and I shall be grateful to him all the same."

"You needn't overdo the grateful business, Mary, or make quite such a howling about it, I think."

She turned to him amazed ; she had been apologising to herself in her enthusiasm.

"Surely," she said, opening her eyes in wonder, "we ought to be very grateful to Mr. Oliver? Surely we *are* grateful to him? Laurence, I don't understand you."

"Oh, yes ; of course we are very grateful to him, and all that ; quite grateful enough. But I presume he wouldn't do it if he didn't like it. A man may have motives of his own even for doing good actions."

"I don't see what possible motive Mr. Oliver could have. He has nothing to gain from us or our approval."

"Yes, yes ; that's all very well, but there are motives in everything—motives, motives. I don't fancy Oliver does it all out of mere friendly regard for *me*."

"But he has a very warm friendship for you."

"Oh, well; of course. But he does not come here day after day to see me, that, I suppose one *may* say."

"How, Laurence? I don't think I understand."

"My dear, one may be very modest and yet not be quite so simple. Might it not be on the cards that he comes to see you?"

"To see me?"

"Why, certainly, as the Americans say. If you weren't a handsome woman, this place wouldn't see quite so much of him, you may depend on that."

"Laurence!" The horror of his meaning began to impress itself on her. She had not in the least understood him. Now there was a look upon his face that could not be misunderstood.

"One can see things," he said. "What's there unlikely about Oliver coming after you, or falling in love with you, if you come to that?"

"Oh, shame on you, shame, shame!" she cried; and her form seemed to grow with the energy of genuine passion. "You are a coward and a craven to insult a woman like that." He actually recoiled before her sudden outburst. He had never seen her in such a mood before; never thought she could be in such a mood.

"Come, come," he grumbled out, "there's no use in making too much of a thing. I don't see why you should make a tragedy-queen of yourself—all about nothing."

"About nothing! Do you know what you said; do you put any meaning on your own words?"

"Well, what did I say?"

"You said that Mr. Oliver came to this house so often to see me; you spoke as if he wanted to make love to me. Is there any meaning but the one to be put on such words as these?"

"But I didn't say that you wanted to be made love to—and I don't see where the insult comes in. I never had any suspicion as far as you are concerned. And I don't see anything very astonishing in Oliver's falling in love with you."

"Oh!" she exclaimed with a shudder, "how can you talk like that—and of him, who has been our best friend, our only friend?"

"Nonsense, Mary, nonsense—a man may be a very good fellow, and yet not be quite insensible to the charms of a handsome woman——"

"The wife of his friend? Oh," and the shudder went through her again, and she turned her face away.

"I didn't say he meant any harm or anything

serious—or that he meant anything at all—it is you who are putting a bad construction on what I said. I only meant that he likes to come here so much, because he admires you—and surely if I don't mind, there is no need for you to be horrified. Oliver is a very good fellow: there's nothing wrong about him; you are quite safe."

"Oh, safe! yes; I am quite safe with him. He is not the man to make love to the wife of the friend whom he has saved from ruin, and from death. When he does a kindness to man or woman, he has no base motive in it."

"Who ever said he had? I never did. I suppose a man may admire a woman without having any base motive——"

"No; he may not," she said, impetuously breaking in upon him; "a man could not allow himself to admire a woman in that way, and under such conditions, without a base motive. Remember what he has done for us; remember how we are bound to him. We ought to be ready to give up our very lives for him, if he wanted such a sacrifice. He knows all this; he knows how grateful we are; I say no man who had earned such gratitude could think for one moment of his friend's wife in any way like the sort of admiration you

“speak of—at least, he couldn’t without baseness; and Mr. Oliver is the last man in the world to be capable of anything base.”

“Well, we have had enough about it, I think,” he said with a sort of snarl.

“I don’t know,” she said, doubtfully, as if she were seriously arguing the question with him, and with herself. “I think we ought to ask him not to come here so often in the future.”

“Yes; a very pretty idea, truly; and so put it into his head that I suspected him, or that I suspected you.”

She drew a deep, long breath.

“You have made our position so difficult; so distressing,” she said. “It seems such a treachery to him to let him come here day after day in his friendly way, while we are talking of him like this. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’ll enlighten you,” Laurence said, with a sneer. “Do nothing. There is nothing to be done.”

“It seems such horrible hypocrisy.”

“Oh, there has to be a great deal of that sort of hypocrisy in every-day life. I tell you again nothing was said to disparage him; and, after all, he is my friend, not yours.”

“Laurence,” she exclaimed, piteously, her mood having suddenly changed from anger to grief.

"Oh, my husband, what has come over you? Why have you changed in this way, and grown so suspicious and distrustful and cruel? You never used to be like that. Oh, I used to think it very miserable when you were so sick, and we were alone; but I would give much now to be back to those days again."

"Yes; I dare say you would," he said, angrily. "It would not give you much trouble if I were just as sick as before——"

"We were so fond of each other," she pleaded. "It was a happiness to me to watch over you, and attend on you, and try to make you comfortable; and I was rewarded enough by a kindly word, or even a kindly look. And now——"

"You make too much of things; altogether too much of little, trifling things; you are much too sentimental; you let your sentiments run away with you."

She turned to him and put her hands upon his shoulders and drew her face towards his in the manner of one who is making a last appeal; she looked earnestly into his eyes. He tried to look away and not to meet her gaze.

"Laurence, my dear husband, I don't seem to know you to-day. You are all changed. Your very look is not the same. Tell me, dear, is there

any reason for this? Are you concealing anything from me? Has something happened which distresses and distracts you, and which I don't know? Tell me everything. I had rather know of anything than believe that you are changed."

She had no particular meaning in her words, and could not think of anything that might, as she said, have distracted him. But she had a wild hope that something might have happened, some stroke of evil fortune which had quite put him out for the moment and made him not himself. Anything would be better than to have to believe that it was himself, his very self, who had lately spoken to her. He disengaged himself from her, and she let her hands fall hopelessly.

"Nothing has happened," he said, "for good or bad. I have not had a piece of news of any kind all day; I don't know what you are thinking about. Now, perhaps, you will kindly read me a bit, and let us have done with the heroics."

"Yes," she answered; "I will have done with the heroics."

So she sat down and opened her volume and read to him. She read on and on in a clear monotone, all the while not knowing what she was reading. She was thinking of the past and the present and the future. Was this her husband,

the husband of her youth and of her love? Would he go on like this, or grow worse and worse every day? How would it be with them in the future? And how was she to meet Mr. Oliver day after day and be pleasant and friendly with him, while remembering how Laurence had spoken of him? Could she so rule herself as to prevent him sometimes from seeing that there was constraint in her manner? It was not merely the words that Laurence had spoken, although these were very painful and shocking; but the look, the manner, all gave them an odious significance. She felt degraded; and, above all, she felt that dread uncertainty which, as we have said before, is one of the cruellest accompaniments of calamity. The firm ground was gone from beneath her feet. What might not happen next? Their lives could never be the same again. Among all the uncertainties that she knew to be the one thing certain. She was not conscious that she had actually stopped reading. Suddenly she was recalled to consciousness by a noise; the book had dropped from her hands and fallen on the floor. The sound woke up her husband, who had been some time asleep.

"Why," he said, "you have actually been falling asleep, and over Shakespeare! What an odd sort of woman you are."

CHAPTER VII.

GO AWAY!



AFTER a night of all but sleepless misery, Mary Caledon arose with the full conviction that life had wholly changed for her. She could never feel to her husband again as she used to feel to him. This conviction had been growing long upon her; she had endeavoured to chill and freeze its growth—but the forcing-house of last evening's dispute had made it burst into full blossom. Of one duty she felt clear—she must ask Roland Oliver to go away and leave them. She must do this for Laurence's sake, much more than for her own. The generous kindness which Roland poured out upon her husband was not merely thrown away, it did positive harm to such a nature as that of Laurence. It made him at once dependent and ungrateful. From it there came to his mind not confidence, but suspicion. He ascribed to his benefactor the basest motives, and yet he was

willing to stand for ever with hand outstretched to receive the benefits.

"I will not tell Laurence," she resolved, "until after. Then of course I shall tell him, but not before. It must be done first."

They had rather a gloomy and silent breakfast. Shortly after, Laurence came to her dressed for the street, his hat in his hand, a flower in his button-hole. He always contrived to dress very neatly at the worst of times; but to-day he was quite elegant. In the innocent surprise of seeing him thus got up, Mary forgot for the moment their last night's dispute, ignored the present, and went back to her old, familiar, loving way.

"Why, Laurence, my dear, you are such a swell. What very nice clothes! Where did you get them?"

Laurence looked mightily pleased. Her words, and still more her manner, made him hope that she had really forgotten the dispute of last night, in which he admitted to himself that he had been terribly indiscreet. Fancy! in a momentary outburst of unmeaning jealousy to say things to her which might set her against Roland Oliver! What on earth was to become of them if they had not Roland Oliver? And he knew well that Mary,

pliable and soft as potter's clay where only inclinations were concerned, could become firm and strong as marble where conscience or the sense of honour was brought into question. Yes, he had found this out in Constantinople, where she saved him—yes, he admitted that—but at the cost of what a surrender and what a sacrifice to him!

“Yes; don't they fit well?” he said with a gratified smile. “I am trying a new tailor, and I think he'll do.”

This sounded rather too grand and lordly in Mary's ears to make her feel quite comfortable.

“Oh,” she said, coldly. “How did you find him out?”

“Oliver introduced me—he's Oliver's tailor, in fact; and I always admired the make of Oliver's clothes. Don't be alarmed, Mary, he'll get paid; but he is quite content to wait any time.”

“I was not thinking of that,” Mary said in a depressed tone of voice. Then she added almost defiantly: “Oh, yes, I am quite sure he will get paid.” The moment she had spoken the words she felt sorry for having uttered them, and she hoped he had not noticed their significance. Apparently he had not.

“Look here, Mary,” he said, in free-and-easy

manner, "I wonder if you could lend me a sovereign? You shall have it back again as soon as I get paid for that article in *The Jurist*, and I mean to finish it to-day or to-morrow."

Sovereigns were rare treasures in Mary's purse. Laurence and she had for a long time had no money but her little annuity. Bit by bit she had had to sell it out, until it came down to the poor hundred a year, and there she stopped and was firm. Still, as the money was hers, she could not refuse his request, and she gave him a sovereign.

"I am going to the Italian Exhibition," he said, "and I want to be able to pay."

"Oh; with Mr. Oliver?" She was glad he had asked for the sovereign now—very glad she had it to give to him. A feeling of relief, a light of hope came up in her; perhaps this was the first evidence of a resolve to be independent.

"No," he answered, hesitatingly; "I am going to take Mrs. Church there. She likes all that sort of thing, and I knew you would not care a bit about it."

"Then you are not to see Mr. Oliver to-day?" She put this question, as the newspapers say, for the sake of information.

"No; not to-day. He may come in the evening,

perhaps; I hope so. I haven't asked him to go with us."

"With us!" The words brought an odd little sensation to Mary's heart, a sensation quite new to it.

"Because," he went on, unheeding, "he doesn't like Lydia Church. I suppose it is some lingering feeling of the old resentment because she threw him over. Quite natural, of course, that he should feel like that."

She did not believe Roland had any such feeling, or that it was the cause of his dislike to Mrs. Church. But she said nothing, and her husband went his pleasant way.

Then she felt that the time had come to carry out her purpose. Her husband was gone—and was not gone to Mr. Oliver's—and her course was free. The short talk before Laurence's leaving the room had made her resolution a resolve of adamant. "Before he returns home to-night," she said to herself, "this must be done." She had no feeling of real jealousy about Lydia Church. She did not believe Laurence really cared about her, and she felt sure that Lydia had views for herself in life which were quite incompatible with the idea of her allowing herself to be compromised with any man. But she thought it weak, and foolish, and

rather ignoble of Laurence to hang to Mrs. Church's skirts at such a time ; and she feared that it would lead him to the spending of money, and that he would begin to borrow money of Roland. Once it came to that—but, no, she told herself, it shall never come to that. So she put on her things and went out, and got into an omnibus in the Strand which set her down at the bottom of Park Lane.

She might be said to waken up when the omnibus stopped, and the conductor called out "Park Lane." She had been plunged in thought, and saw nothing. People in the omnibus had looked curiously at the beautiful, pale lady who seemed so sad, and seemed to be so much out of keeping with the framework of an omnibus. A young painter who was in the omnibus said to his friend, after she had gone, that it was like seeing a Botticelli in a Tottenham Court Road furniture shop.

The day was one of the most delightful of London summer-days. The exquisite, tantalising perfume of flowers floated from the Park across Mary's path ; it was so sweet to her that the sense ached at it. She stopped for a moment and looked through the railings on the Park side of the Lane ; looked fondly and sadly, as one gazes on some dear place which is never to be

seen again. Mary was not thinking that she should never see the Park again; it would have been a relief to her if she could think that she was never to see it again. What she felt was that she never could see it again under the conditions that made it bright for her. All that was over—absolutely over. Nothing could bring it back to her, because nothing could give her back her husband—the husband of her youth, and her love, and her faith.

None the less was she resolute to do all she could for him; and so she turned and went her way.

Roland Oliver had breakfasted, and had sent away his breakfast things, and was lounging at an open window with a newspaper in his hand, into the contents of which he plunged every now and then with the desperate air of a man determined to read or die. Then his mind wandered off and he fell into a pool of thought. Out of this he suddenly scrambled and took to the dry high road of his newspaper once more.

He was thinking a good deal about how to get the Caledons out of the Agar Street rooms, and into some lodgings in a pleasanter part of the town, nearer to himself, and where they would be free of Lydia Church. He did not like Lydia Church;

he did not like the way in which she seemed to flatter and flirt with and play upon Laurence Caledon; he thought that her presence boded mischief somehow. But how to get the Caledons away? Laurence could be easily managed—but Mary? He actually had a wild idea of talking it all out with Laurence — of prevailing upon Laurence to enter into a plot with him, and carry on a pious fraud wherewith to delude Mary, and get over her scruples. Why not invent an employment for Laurence—a secretaryship of some kind—which would occupy him a few hours in the day, and for which he was to receive, say, five guineas a week? Arranging, for example, the materials for an eminent author, who had undertaken a work which would keep him occupied for a considerable time; say a “History of the World,” or a “Complete Exposition of the Codes, Laws, and Principles of Justice of all States, Nations, and Tribes”? Laurence could amuse himself at the British Museum for a few hours every day, and Roland could hand him over the five guineas every week. But then, Roland asked himself, would even this pious fraud be fair towards Mary? And he had to answer himself, no, it would not. He even asked himself, would it be fair to Laurence

to tempt him with such a scheme? And again he had to answer, no, it would not.

"It is very hard," he thought, sadly enough, "to do a kindly act for one's friend in this queer, conventional world."

He was roused from his serious thinking and his sham reading by his servant coming to tell him that a lady particularly wished to see him. Could it be Lydia Church? He hoped not; but could think of no other woman who would be at all likely to favour him with a morning call. Anyhow, he must see her.

"Show the lady in," he said, wearily; and presently Mary Caledon entered the room.

"Mrs. Caledon—has anything happened?"

"You are surprised to see me," she began.

"Never mind; how is Laurence?" he asked, eagerly.

"Laurence is quite well. He has gone to the Italian Exhibition; he does not know that I am here."

"You have some bad news, I know. Do sit down, and let me know the worst."

"It is bad news," she said; "but not in the ordinary sense, Mr. Oliver. I want to talk to you about my husband."

Can it be, Roland thought, that Lydia has been playing any tricks? But he only said, aloud: "Yes, Mrs. Caledon, you can say anything you wish to me."

"I know. I want to make an appeal to your good nature, your generosity, your friendship, on behalf of my husband and myself."

"An appeal on behalf of your husband and yourself, Mrs. Caledon! Well, I think you can tell beforehand how the appeal will be answered. Only tell me what it is."

"You have done him so much good already; you have given him back to health; now give him back to himself—give him back to me—to me!" Her impetuosity startled the young man.

"Mrs. Caledon, I don't understand you. We all seemed so happy."

"We are not happy; I am not; he is not. Between us we should soon make you miserable—as miserable as ourselves."

"Everything seemed to be going on so well. I was so happy to get back my old friend—and to make a new friend," he added, in a deferential tone.

"Oh, yes; it all seemed so happy at first," she exclaimed. "I shall never forget those first happy

days when I said you came like a Providence. Don't you remember ? ”

“ As if I could forget.”

“ But things are different now,” she said, sadly ; “ and, you know, in any case it would not do for us to live on for ever like paupers upon you. Laurence takes it too much as a matter of course ; I hate to see it. Don't you see, Mr. Oliver, that your very kindness and generosity only enfeeble him, and make him rely on you altogether, and not in the least on himself ? If you were a woman, and a wife, you would understand what I mean, and you would feel what I feel.”

“ I do understand it, quite,” he said, in a sort of soothing tone. “ And I can put myself in your place easily enough, and feel what you feel. But, believe me, you exaggerate things a great deal. Laurence is a little weak yet ; he has had a hard pull of it, and his nerve hasn't all come back to him yet. But he'll be all right before long, and then he'll go to work, and I'll impel him instead of keeping him back. Why, we have long talks about it every other day, about what he is to do ; and he seems as eager for it as you or I could be.”

“ Yes, long talks ;” and she shook her head.

“ I am afraid the long talks do him more harm

than good. When he talks of doing a thing it is the same for him as if he had done it. Oh, I ought not to speak of my husband in that way to any one," she cried, "even to you. It sounds disloyal; it sounds as if I were finding fault with him, and I am not finding fault with him; only I want you, his friend, to help me to make him strong and independent and ready to face the world."

"And so I will—so I will; but we must go slowly for a while, and you see, Mrs. Caledon, I really shouldn't know what to do with myself or my life, or—or anything, if I hadn't him to look after. Why, you have no idea what a pleasure it is to me."

"Yes; I know," she answered with tears starting to her eyes. "I know how it delights you to do good; but, I must tell you—oh, it is so hard to have to say it—that you are *not* doing him good—and that you can't do him good in that way, and you are not doing yourself good."

"Oh, yes, indeed I am."

"No, you are not. A man has no right to lead such a life."

"Well, but you see I have money enough; I don't want to do anything in particular."

"But you ought to do something. You have talents and education and you are accountable for

the use you make of your gifts—and think of the time you fritter away with him and with me.”

“Oh, fritter! The time passes delightfully for me.”

“But that kind of life ought not to delight you.”

“What can I do?”

“Travel, study, write books, devote yourself to some cause, something——”

“Join the Crusaders—go out and fight the Saracens?” he said with a melancholy smile.

“Yes, why not? There are Crusades to be fought still here at home. There are holy sepulchres to be recovered; there are Saracens to be fought—vice and ignorance and the poverty that comes of vice and ignorance, and that avenges itself by engendering vice and ignorance—there, go and fight against these Saracens. Oh, I am ashamed of myself and my heroics. Laugh at me, if you like—I wish you would, Mr. Oliver; for I am making myself ridiculous.”

“I shan’t laugh,” he answered, gravely; “I don’t feel in anything like a laughing mood, and if I am any good for one of these Crusades and for fighting these Saracens, I surely shall not be the less useful because I have two dear friends to advise

me and to take an interest in my efforts. I don't want to lead an idle life, Mrs. Caledon, I assure you; I should be delighted to be of some help to some good cause. But I honestly do not see why I should for that reason have to give up your society and Laurence's. Tell me—tell me why if I do the one thing I must give up the other?"

Mary felt sorely tried. She could not tell him the reason why; she could not tell him the truth which had lately been forced upon her, that her husband's was a nature in which kindness from an outsider only grows up poison plants. She felt that she was right in urging Roland Oliver to leave them once and for all; that was to her a sacred duty from which nothing could relieve her; but she could not give him her reasons—her principal reasons. She felt, indeed, perplexed in the extreme.

"Mr. Oliver," she said, "I am driven to make an appeal to you—to your generosity, and your friendship——"

"Oh, Mrs. Caledon, any appeal from you——"

"No; listen to me. You know how highly I think of you, you know how I value your friendship—now don't you?"

She stopped for an answer, and he had to say:

"Oh, yes; I do know."

"You know what a deep, and strong, and tender friendship I have for you. I never had a brother; but I am sure no brother could ever be more kind, and sweet, and sympathetic to his sister than you have been to me. And you know how I enjoy your society—don't you know it?" She waited again for an answer, and he had to reply :

"You were always very nice to me, Mrs. Caledon."

"Well, then," she said, almost impatiently, "do you think I would tell you to give us up if I had not some good reason?"

"No; I am sure of that. But you ask me to make a great sacrifice and you don't give me any reason."

"Don't give you any reason? Have I not told you that while you are there, a support to him, Laurence never will make himself independent? I think I can still influence him in the right way, Mr. Oliver; but I think I must try it alone."

"Well," he murmured, after a silence, "I suppose there is no more to be said. You pass on me a sentence of banishment——"

"I do—I do—I have to do it. You will say some time that I was right."

"I say that now," and he smiled a sweet, pathetic smile that sent a pang to her heart. "I am sure of it. I do not pretend to understand you; but I know that anything you say is right. Well, I will go into exile—for a while; and then I will come back and fight the Saracens some day. Thou shalt praise me that day, oh, Cæsar!"

"I praise you in advance, if I am Cæsar; and I thank you, and I bless you." She spoke with a passionate energy which she could not wholly suppress.

"Tell me one thing," he said. "Is Laurence to know of this?"

"Oh, yes; he surely will know that you are going away."

"But I mean—is he to know that you have banished me?"

"I will tell him later, not now, but later; it is only right. I will not have him think that it was any whim of yours. I will tell him all my reasons; and in the end he will say that I was right. I owe him an absolute frankness."

"Very well," he said, after a pause, and with a sigh, "that is settled; and that moan is soon made. I shall go abroad somewhere, and I shall leave you my address, so that if ever you want

a friend you shall know where to find him. I shall come from the other end of the earth at a word from him or from you. I can't but think it is a little hard, but what is the use of arguing the question?" He felt a strange storm of pain and passion rising in his heart. The sense was new to him; he was shaken by it.

"No," she said, "there is no use."

"I thought to be able to make you both happy," he pleaded, hardly knowing why he was trying to plead.

"You will make many people happy yet, I know," she said. "You will make some woman happy; I never knew a man better fitted for that kind work, Mr. Oliver."

What was the strange and painful sensation quite new to him, that came up in Roland's breast as she spoke these words in sweet and tender tone, half jest, whole earnest? In a moment he was enlightened; it was the flash of a revelation. Never, never before had he known what now was a terrible truth to him. He saw now his heart laid bare to himself; and with the revelation came the instant thought—*she* must never know. The one thing uppermost in the poor youth's mind was the resolve that at any exercise of Spartan suffering he must

keep all suspicion of that kind from her. He looked up—and oh, what an effort and a pain it cost him—into her face with smiling eyes.

“Very well, Mrs. Caledon; for the sake of that not impossible ‘she,’ I shall try to take care of myself when I go to fight the Saracens at home and abroad.”

“Then you will go,” she said; and a great rush of pity and pathos seemed to flood her heart. But her resolve did not give way.

“Oh, yes! I will go. I shall go and travel. I love yachting. I shall get a yacht, and live the life of a pirate, without the piracy.”

“And you are not angry with me for sending you away? You forgive me? You understand me? Oh, please tell me that you do understand me—my motives, I mean, not my reasons? These I can’t explain.”

“I do understand your motives thoroughly. And, Mrs. Caledon”—he spoke with a sudden energy which his uttermost caution could not keep altogether down—“if it be any comfort to you to know it, I feel sure already, here, that you are in the right, and that I must go.”

“This is not absolute good-bye,” she said.

“Oh, no! I must come and tell Laurence,

and talk to him. Only it is the close of a chapter," he said, with a smile which was lighted but by a wintry sun.

"Yes, it is the close of a chapter—a chapter which will never pass from my memory, and which has its hero, Mr. Oliver. Good-bye! I shall think well of the whole race of men because of you."

"And I shall think well of the whole race of women," he echoed, "because of you."

How plain it all was now to him! How coldly and cruelly clear! The naked, shuddering soul was revealed before him. Mary Caledon's harmless allusion to the girl he was to make happy had sent a pang through him which brought an awakening self-knowledge with it, as pain so often does. He had never before suspected anything of the kind; he had never known that his feeling towards Mary Caledon was anything more than that of strong and tender friendship. Now it was all made clear to him. Now he saw, only too plainly, why he had obstinately fought against his own gradual discovery of the true nature of his old friend, Laurence Caledon. Again and again had he been on the point of admitting the slowly-growing conviction of Laurence's cruel egotism and

absorbing selfishness. And again and again he had driven the thought back, and mentally denounced himself for wronging his old friend, even in thought. Now he knew why all this was so. It was only because he could not bear the idea of losing the society of Mary Caledon. Oh, perhaps even fiction has not yet sounded the deeps of an honest and generous man's capacity for self-deception! If Laurence was really the worthless creature whom Roland's suspicions sometimes described him, a parting of the ways must sooner or later come; and that would be, for him, a parting from Mary Caledon. He found the tears coming into his eyes as he thought of her; and then, as his momentary impulse was to be ashamed of such weakness, he angrily asked himself who would not own to tears for such a woman—so young, so beautiful, so gifted, so capable of having and giving happiness, so misprised, so thrown away, so unhappy?

CHAPTER VIII.

ROLAND'S WHIM.

MARY was gone. She would not wait while he sent for a cab for her; she would not let him come downstairs with her. When she had gone the room seemed darkened, as a room is darkened when even the melancholy sunbeam of a wintry sky is withdrawn. In one sense, and one only, he felt relieved. He could think more freely now that she had gone; he could let his feelings flow. "The close of a chapter!" he said to himself over again. "The close of a chapter! And the chapter must remain closed—must never, never be reopened." He had got into a false position, and there was nothing for him but to get out of it again with the least possible hurt or pain to—not to himself, he was not thinking of that—but to others. First of all, what has to be done? Well, there are three things which have to be done. The real cause

of his retreat from the tripartite partnership must never be known to Mary. The influence of Mary's appeal over him must never be acknowledged by him, at least, to Laurence. Something must be done to help Laurence, after he, Roland, had gone, in order to enable Laurence thereafter to help himself. These were, for the hour, the three "categories" over which the anxious brains of poor Roland were busy. It was well for him—he felt it even then—that he should have busy brains. The throb of their work would drown the sound of his beating heart. There was one comfort—her last words of frank and friendly regard for him showed that she suspected nothing.

Roland suddenly remembered what Mary had said about her husband having gone to the Italian Exhibition. He had hardly attached any meaning to the words when she spoke them, but now they came back to him. "I may as well go there as anywhere else," he thought, "and if I come upon him I will tell him at once, and have it over; and, anyhow, it will be something to do." He felt now, more deeply even than Mary could feel it, that he must go away. But he was not thinking so much even of that as of how he could contrive to do something which might bring a little ease and bright-

ness into Mary Caledon's life. What could he do? What was there to be done?

He kept racking his brain with these questions while he wandered dreamily, looking at nothing, through ranges of stalls and mountains of soaps and spices. He passed without looking in, the door of one of the refreshment rooms. But he did not pass unseen by a pair inside, a man and a woman, and his appearance startled them both as much as if it were not an appearance but an apparition.

"Roland Oliver!" Laurence said, below his breath, and looking blankly at the crimsoning Lydia. "What the devil can he be doing here?"

"I would not be seen by him for all the world!" she said, her lips compressed. "What would he say—what would he think?"

"I don't see what harm you are doing, or what affair it is of his," Laurence said, angrily, and very inconsistently.

"Stuff! I wish I hadn't come. Look here; I must escape. Yes, please don't argue; I must—I must! You run after him."

"Run after him?"

"Yes, of course; that's the only way. Talk to him. Carry him off in some other direction,

and give me time to escape. Go—go!” The alarmed Lydia all but bundled poor Laurence out of the place.

So, then, this was what he had spent his day and his money for! He was only a person with whom Mrs. Church was ashamed to be seen in public! He never thought of the possibility of her having designs of her own upon Roland; designs strictly honourable—distinctly matrimonial. He knew so well of Roland's dislike to her that it never occurred to him to think that Lydia might not know of the dislike, or might not despair of being able to cajole or conquer it. Therefore, her alarm at the thought of being seen with him by Roland appeared to him simply an insult to his poverty and his position. All the same, he was very glad that Roland had not seen *him* with *her*.

He had not much trouble in overtaking Roland, who was wandering on in a “melancholy, slow” sort of way.

“I didn't expect to see you here,” Laurence said.

“No, I am sure you didn't; but I came here looking for you.”

“My wife told you I was here?”

“Yes; she told me you had gone.”

“I wonder did she tell him anything else?”

Laurence thought. The mental question was quickly answered.

“But what a dreary sort of place for you to be wandering about all alone in, Laurence. Why didn’t you let me know? You’re not looking over well either.”

Laurence’s alarm had brought a little shock to his nerves, and he was looking the worse for it. Roland gazed at him with sympathy and with compassion. “Have I, then, done him no good—but only harm—as *she* says?” he thought.

“I want to talk to you about something,” Roland said. “Let’s go and have a cigar and a soda-and-brandy somewhere. You know the place; I never was here before—go ahead!”

Laurence led the way to some seats near a refreshment bar. Roland produced his cigar-case, and the soda-and-brandy soon foamed before them. Roland drank his off at a draught—a wholly unwonted performance for him.

“I am so thirsty,” he said. “I must positively have another.”

“You were going to tell me something, Roland?”

“I was, old boy—and I am. I’ll begin as soon as I have started my cigar and have the new

B. and S. beside me. Oh, here we are. Now then."

Laurence looked at him a little surprised. There was a sort of roystering way about him to-day to which Laurence was quite unaccustomed. He seemed curiously excited.

"Well, it's just this—I'm going away."

"Going away! Where?"

"That I don't know. Somewhere out of England. Round the world in a yacht I think, to begin with."

Laurence looked aghast.

"Do you mean to be long away?"

"Dear boy, I haven't the slightest notion—yet."

"This is a very sudden resolve, Roland."

"All my resolves are sudden resolves. I feel to-day that I ought to be doing something. I must—I must! I have been leading too lazy and happy a life of late, and laziness and happiness are no longer permitted to sinful man. Therefore comes my destiny, and claps me on the shoulder, and says: 'Get up, you sluggard, and work; no more folding of your absurd hands to sleep.'"

"Well, of course," Laurence said, in faltering

and hollow tones of the deepest depression; "of course, if you like it."

"My dear fellow, I don't like it! I would much rather stay at home with Mary and you. Where do you think I shall ever find such jolly good friends as Mary and you?"

His manner perplexed Laurence. The very way in which he rattled out the words, "Mary and you," was odd. Laurence had never before heard him speak of her as "Mary." "It's all stuff what that little devil hinted," he said to himself—the "little devil" being Lydia Church. "He doesn't care a straw about Mary in that way. She couldn't hold him here, even if she were to try."

"Then why, in the name of patience, do you go?" Laurence asked of his friend, in the tone of an injured man. Laurence spoke with the manner of one who meant to say: "Don't you know the inconvenience it will put *me* to if you go away and leave me here?"

"Well, you see, as I said, it is Destiny. I have been looking at it—impelled to the inspection, I dare say, by Destiny—through two lights: the light of mood and the light of principle. My mood has changed towards England for the present; it will change back again, I dare say, after I go

abroad. That's the mood ; but then comes in the principle."

Laurence was inclined to say: "Curse the mood, and confound the principle!" But he did not indulge his inclination.

"Well, the principle?" he asked, grimly.

"The principle comes in this way: I have been living a life of idleness, and I have no right to live a life of idleness; it's a sin and a shame. And I have been making an idler of you as well. I wouldn't work myself, and I wouldn't let you work. Fact is, I allowed myself to be merely selfish. I wanted companionship. I wanted to be amused by you and Mary—by you and Mary—and as I was idle, I must have you idle too; and there's about the whole truth of it."

Laurence was a very suspicious man, and, like most men of that order, very often suspected in the wrong place and in the wrong way. He suspected now that Roland was, for some reason, playing a part. What was the reason? Now, if he could only have allowed into his mind one flash of a suspicion that his friend was playing a part for an entirely unselfish purpose, he might have got at the truth soon enough. But it was not his way to suspect people of unselfish purposes.

"Why can't you turn to and do some work here?" Laurence argued, sharply. "What do you want to do?"

"Don't you see that's the very thing I have not yet got to know? I want to find out my vocation. A man might try a public life—go into Parliament, or the County Council even, or lend a helping hand in some organised work to improve the condition of the poor, or anything. But I can't think it out until I have had something of a change, and so my mind is made up. I'll go away for a while, and then I'll come back, of course, and turn to. Where's my brandy-and-soda? Oh, yes. Have another, Laurence? You have had only one."

"No, thanks," Laurence said, stiffly. "How happy for you to be able to go away, and consult your own inclinations!" he added.

"Yes; I ought to be very thankful, I know. But I dare say, Laurence, I should have made better way in the world if I had to begin without a sixpence, and work for my living."

"Rich people talk in that way," said Laurence, with a bitter sneer, "when they want to reconcile poor devils to their poverty. But they can't do it; they don't take in the poor devils, and they don't take in themselves. I don't know why they should try, I am sure."

Roland did not seem as if he had been listening to these remarks. He went off at a tangent.

"Now, look at your wife!" he exclaimed. "Look at Mary Caledon! By Jove, she's an example to you and me! She's going in for a literary career because she can't be idle, she says. And she has had no practice in literature. But she means to stick to it, and work it up, she says; and by Jove, Laurence, that woman will succeed!"

"Were you telling my wife about *this*?"

"About what?"

"About your going away."

"Oh, yes; I told her. I let it out somehow. She rather scolded me—so far as she can get in scolding, which isn't very far, as you know."

"Scolded you for going?" Laurence asked with a jarring harshness in his voice.

"No; oh, dear no; rather approved of that, I think. She scolded me for having led such an idle life, and done nothing; and she's right—of course she is right. So I fancy she was pleased to hear of my resolve; anyhow, that is what I am going to do. So, Laurence," he jumped up and clapped his friend on the shoulder, "we must have some good times before we go. Shan't we, dear boy?"

"I should think," Laurence answered with keen

ill-humour in his voice, "that would be but a poor preparation for the life of hard work—of downright drudgery, in fact—to which I shall have to apply myself after you have gone. But of course you will not allow that to affect you in any way."

Roland's heart was pierced by the words, and the look, and the reproachful voice. He put his hand again upon his friend's shoulder.

"Dear old Laurence," he said, tenderly, "did you really think I was going off to leave you to a life of drudgery? No, you didn't think it. I have my whims and my selfish moods, but I am not like *that*. Why, that would be only to throw you back into bad health again. No, no; I have been thinking all the day how it can be best arranged for you, so that you should have enough to be going on with. Look here, will you talk it over with Mary?"

"Oh, no," Laurence answered, all too quickly; "I should not like to do *that*—at least she would not understand."

"Perhaps you are right—perhaps I had better; we can think it over meanwhile to ourselves. Anyhow, I'll make that all right. And now, what about dinner? When, where, and how shall we

dine; and where shall we go after? Shall we go back for your wife, or would she mind your having a bachelor day of it—just for once?”

Laurence felt a little relieved, and was easily prevailed upon to go and take part in a very nice little dinner, with the champagne delightfully “on ice.” But he had had a terrible shock. At one moment it seemed as if the whole of his comfortable little world was shattering and crashing about his ears. Now he felt encouraged and almost satisfied as to his prospects. But in his heart he was bitter against Roland. “He’s tired of us, and that’s why he’s going,” he thought to himself. He was glad that Roland was going. He could not forgive the shock which had been given to his nerves by Roland’s abrupt announcement. He could not forgive Roland for what he considered his purse-proud and patronising ways; could not forgive him for being able to indulge his inclination to go abroad; could not forgive him for being rich; could not forgive him for speaking of Mrs. Caledon as “Mary.” “Does he think we are no better than the dust under his feet?” he asked of his own soul in fierce self-torment.

Still it was a great relief to him to know that he was not to be left uncared for; even though it

made him furious to think that if Roland chose he could leave him wholly uncared for. "Why the devil should he be so rich, and I so poor?"

He went with Roland after dinner to the play, all the same.

What was Roland thinking of at the dinner, where he kept up such a display of rattling high spirits? Well, he was thinking, for one thing, that he had managed well in his way of letting out the news to Laurence. He could not help letting Laurence know that Mary had spoken to him on the subject, for she would tell him that herself later on; but he wanted to minimise as much as possible in Laurence's mind the influence of Mary's advice. He wanted to forestall Mary, and to make it appear that he was determined to go away in any case, and that he had, therefore, hardly given any serious attention to Mary's words. Roland did not relish even this much of pious fraud. He would rather—oh, how much rather!—have been frank, open, and altogether truthful, with Mary and with Laurence both. But suppose he was to be thus frank, open, and altogether truthful, what would it mean? It would mean that he must say to Mary: "I love you; I am in love with you, the wife of my friend; I have

acknowledged this to myself, and therefore I must go away." It would mean his saying to Laurence: "Yes, your wife has done all she could to prevail on me to go away, and to leave you to work for yourself; but it's not for that I go away; it's because I find I am in love with her, and dare not longer stay near her."

So absolute truth being out of the question, Roland thought he had counterfeited well. He felt sure that Mary would have a bad time of it if Laurence believed that she had driven him away. He had saved her from that, at all events. Laurence would think she had talked with Roland about a plan on which Roland had already quite made up his mind—and that would be all.

Mary Caledon was sitting with a book in her hand when her husband came home from the theatre. Very likely she had not been reading. She had a good deal to think about—regret, pity, doubt, dread—perhaps even some little shadowy and flickering hope; and all this would come between her and the letter-press on the page. She looked up when her husband came in, and met him with a welcoming smile.

"I have been dining with Roland Oliver," he said; "it was a bad dinner for the place—and

for the price, I dare say. Then we went to the play—a stupid play. Well, the dinners and plays are pretty nearly over now.”

Mary looked up inquiringly.

“Oh, you know,” he said; “Roland told you—he told me he did. He’s going away. He’s tired of us—really tired of us at last.”

“Did he say so, Laurence?”

“Well, dear, it would be hardly polite to say so; now, would it? But he conveyed it—he made it pretty clear.”

“How did he make it clear?”

“Said it was a whim of his, that he wanted change, that it was one of his moods, that he couldn’t settle to anything until he had some variety and some amusement. Then he’s going to settle down and do great things—of course; we know all about *that*. Jove! how can a man be so selfish?”

“Laurence! Selfish? Mr. Oliver?”

“Just so—Mr. Oliver. What could be more selfish than his whole way of going on? Took us up when he wanted amusement, drops us down when we don’t amuse him any more. Why, what did he always lead us to expect? Not this, surely. What is to become of us—what’s to become of me?”

"But, Laurence, my dear, we could not go on for ever living on Mr. Oliver, as if we were paupers. When you were ill—oh, then it was different—then we could not help ourselves, then one did not mind. One took the bounty as one took the whole misfortune; it was all the will of Heaven. But now, my dear, you are so much better and stronger—and all owing to him, remember—we must never forget that—now we must work for ourselves, you and I; and we will, we will."

She laid her hands on his shoulders while she thus pleaded in her earnest, pathetic way. She tried to look into his eyes as if to find there the light of that better nature that must be in him. But he kept turning his head restlessly away from her, and his manner showed an irritation that was not to be soothed by her. After a moment he shook himself loose, not roughly, but resolutely.

"He might have given me some notice of his intention—so little time to turn round! Instead of that he springs it on me. What am I to do? I haven't any money to be going on with; you haven't any. He talks in his patronising, lordly way of doing something for me; but of course he'll forget all about it. Oh, I know him now;

I didn't before. Fancy—he throws us off and leaves us to starve, perhaps—just to gratify a sudden whim! Was there ever anything so horribly and hideously selfish?”

“But why do you think it is to gratify a whim?”

“Because he told me so—at least he implied it—again and again.”

The truth shone in on Mary. “He has done that to screen me—to save me.” She knew it.

“Laurence,” she said, very gravely, “I cannot allow Mr. Oliver to calumniate himself, no matter how generous his motives may be. He is not a creature of whims, and this is not a whim. He's going away because I begged and besought him to go.”

“You begged and besought him to go?”

“Yes, I did; because he's doing himself no good, and us much harm. I see you sinking down to be a mere dependent, and yet I see you every day growing more and more suspicious of the very man whose bounty we are living on. Such words have passed between us—I mean between you and me—as never were exchanged between us before. Last night was the climax; I could endure it no more. I did not think it

right for the sake of our lives, our future, our peace, our souls, that such things should ever be said and listened to again, and I went to him and begged him to leave us to ourselves—and to our fate.”

She was trembling with emotion. He looked at her contemptuously.

“How like a woman’s vanity,” he said. “I am sorry to disturb the gratification of that belief in your power to do harm to your husband, and to drive his friends away from him. I don’t doubt your will, my dear; I only question your power. Roland Oliver did not care twopence what you said; he hardly seemed to remember what you said; it passed in through one ear and out through the other. No, no; it’s all plain enough. He’s tired of us; he wants to be rid of us; he takes a whim for going abroad; and so—off he goes.”

Thus Laurence settled the matter, and he chuckled scornfully over her supposed discomfiture.

CHAPTER IX.

GOADING HIM ON.

NEXT morning Mrs. Church found herself tingling with curiosity to know whether Laurence had caught up with Roland at the Exhibition, and what had passed between them, and whether Roland had any suspicion of her propinquity. She was afraid she had not behaved very well to poor Laurence. "But what could I do?" she put it to earth, air, and skies to tell her. "I couldn't let Roland find me there with *him*." All she was now afraid of was, that Laurence would have told Roland out of sheer spite and anger to vex her, and she felt that she must conciliate him a little; and she could not help exploding into small, sudden bursts of laughter at the recollection of his white, astonished, wrathful face, when she sent him packing after Roland. Yes—she must certainly soothe and conciliate him a little—always supposing he had not told any tales about her. So she sent

up a dainty little note to him by the hands of Cora, and the note said, "Do please come down to me. I want to see you.—L. C."

Then Mrs. Church touched herself up at her looking-glass, and prepared to receive her visitor. The visitor looked sullen and glum.

"My dear Mr. Caledon, I know you are angry with me—and I know I was very abrupt. But I couldn't help it. I couldn't. I don't know what he would have said of me—or what people would have said of me. Why wasn't Mrs. Caledon there? people would ask—now wouldn't they?"

"Why didn't you think of all that before?" he asked, still unmollified.

"I know, I know—I ought to have; but I didn't think of it, and, of course, I was glad to go. Oh, there wasn't the least harm in the world in it, only *he* was always so particular, and people will talk so; and, you see, we are both of us young, and you are a married man, and evil tongues might make scandal out of it. How's your wife?"

"Oh, she's all right."

"She didn't mind?"

"Didn't mind what?"

"Our going off to the Exhibition together in that way."

"Oh—she? Not the least little bit in the world."

This was decidedly disappointing. Lydia had hoped to hear of domestic trouble and of jealous tears. She was annoyed; she regarded it as a slight to her.

"Had *he* any suspicion about me—Roland Oliver?"

"No—not the least. He wasn't thinking about anything of the kind. He could talk of nothing but his whim of going away."

"Going away? Where—when—why?"

"I don't know where—at once. I don't know why—whim, he told me."

"Do you believe that?"

"I do—why not? Though I must say my wife doesn't."

"I should say not—I dare say, she has better reasons to know than you have."

This little thrust brought spots of angry red on his cheeks, whereat Lydia was pleased.

"What does your wife say about it?"

"Well, my wife, if you want to know, says that she strongly urged him to go away."

If Laurence had been a less self-centred, and more observant man, he might have been startled

and shocked at the expression of rage, and hate, which showed itself for a moment in Lydia Church's eyes.

"Your wife sent him away?" the little lady exclaimed.

"I didn't say that; she asked him to go away," he answered, sullenly. "I can't think what possessed her."

"Stuff," Mrs. Church said, contemptuously. "You must know something about it. He told you, or she told you, something. Out with it—let us have it."

"She told me that she asked him not to come here any more, and to go away. I did not ask her why; I guessed."

"What did you guess?"

"Oh, well, we have had quarrels about him. She entirely mistook some little hints I gave her—about making herself more agreeable to him; I wanted him to be pleasantly received and made happy, for he was so very good to us; but she mistook my meaning and she flew out in a passion."

Mrs. Church broke into a scornful little laugh.

"And you really believe that was the reason why she sent him away? You really believe that?"

"Yes; I am certain of it."

"Did it never occur to you that to do such a thing as that would only bring on a woman the very scandal she was wishing to avoid? Did it never occur to you that a woman would be afraid of being misunderstood by a man? Might not 'Go away, please, for I am afraid you will make love to me,' sound to some men like 'Stay, please, and be good enough to make love to me'?"

Laurence's face grew dark.

"It would with some women," he began.

"It certainly would with me," she said, with a little laugh.

"But not with a woman like her. You don't understand her. I don't suppose you could."

"Oh, no; of course not; she is one of your angelic order of beings; we ordinary women must not presume to think ourselves capable of understanding her. All the same, I *do* understand her; I read her like an open book. Shall I tell you what I read?"

"If you please," he said, harshly.

"It won't please you to hear it, I fancy."

"Go on," he growled. "Don't mind about me."

"Well, it's this; 'twas not about him she was afraid, but about herself."

"What do you mean by that? I don't understand in the least what you are driving at."

"How very dull you are. Did I not say that she was afraid of herself? Is not that plain? You fool, she found that she was over head and ears in love with the young man, and that's why she sent him away."

He leaped from his chair with an oath.

"If that was true," he cried, "if I thought that was true, I would have her life."

"Bless the man, what a rage he is in now! and all for what? Because his wife is so good a woman that she sends her lover off to the other end of the earth in order to put herself out of the way of temptation! Why, my dear Mr. Caledon, don't you see that you have a model wife; a champion virtuous woman? I am not at all quite sure that if I had been in her case I should have been heroine enough to act on such a resolve."

"The very thought of it is enough to drive a man mad."

"The thought of your wife being so good?"

"The thought of her being in love with him."

"Oh, come; there is nothing very surprising in that. He's a very good fellow, and very attractive. I was in love with him once. You see

he made a kind of idol and divinity of her—and you—well, you didn't. You were not always very nice to her; and you were always sickly, and complaining, and grumbling——”

“You mean to tell me that she got tired of me——”

“Why, of course she did: tired and sick of you. I wonder she didn't get tired and sick of you long ago. But she's a woman to do the right thing—that you may be sure of; and now that she has packed him off, and finds herself out of danger, you may be sure she will stand by you and do her duty as a wife, and a British matron, and that sort of thing. Oh, yes; that I will say for her.”

“I will ask her! I will put it to her! I will have an answer from her——”

“Well, and suppose she answers honestly, and says my idea is right—what then?”

“Then I shall let her know what she has done. She has robbed me of the only friend I have in life; a friend who was so useful to me. I shall have to starve now that I have lost him. She drove him from me, and all because she dared to fall in love with him. Hang it all,” he exclaimed, savagely, “if she must fall in love with him, couldn't she keep it to herself?”

“Exactly; and then he need not have gone away, and things would be satisfactory and comfortable all round.”

He looked up at her fiercely. He thought there was a mocking meaning in her words; as, indeed, there was, but she did not want to make it quite too plainly apparent. So when he looked at her he saw that her face was quite composed, meditative, even sympathetic. He turned away.

“You had better say nothing about it,” Lydia said. “Let bygones be bygones, and start clear. The thing is done and can’t be helped. She has sent him away; you can’t bring him back.”

“Why not? Why can’t I bring him back?”

“Because he won’t come. You may be sure she has pledged him to that, and has given him some good reason to believe that it is better for her he should go away and stay away. She has probably told him how she feels about him; that would give him some comfort, you know,” Lydia added, coolly.

Laurence was writhing with agony. He was jealous in the most morbidly-sensitive way. It was not the sort of oriental physical jealousy of many men, which is allayed by the knowledge that no wrong has been done. It was the jealousy

of egotism, of self-love, of mortified pride. It was enough for him to believe that his wife had ever thought of any one but him with love; that she had ever allowed any other man to find a place in her heart; that she had found it well another man should go away lest she should come to love him too much for her own peace of mind. He thought nothing of the virtue, of the high purpose, of the resolute purity; he felt only the pangs of his own hurt self-love.

Lydia saw his torture and enjoyed it. But she had much more serious purpose in hand than the mere torturing of unfortunate Caledon. She wanted to have a complete and final break-off between Roland and Mary. She blamed Mary for everything, and felt sure she never should be able to get Roland to marry her while Mary's influence was over him. Her great chance, she thought now, was to work on Caledon's jealousy, and compel him to keep his wife out of Roland's sight. If Mary could only be taken away somewhere quickly, then, perhaps, Roland might remain in London, and she, Lydia, might take his heart on the rebound. Therefore, having established a flaw on the sensitive skin of Laurence's self-love, she kept switching the sore place constantly and smartly.

Laurence wandered about streets, and cafés, and drinking-bars, all that night, and did not return home until the raw morning. Mary heard him stumbling and cursing about the sitting-room, trying for a lamp, trying to light it with a match, trying to get his boots off. This was a new and a ghastly experience for her. Even in Constantinople, when he got into money-troubles by his gambling, and she had only saved him from expulsion from the court of law and the club, and probable prosecution, by selling most of her annuity, and pleading and praying for him, and pledging herself to take him out of Constantinople for ever—even then she had not known him to get drunk. About six in the morning she stole softly to his bedroom, which was only divided from the sitting-room by curtains, and she looked in. The sun was streaming in through the windows, the blinds were not drawn down, and there was the lamp still burning, and there was Laurence on the bed, dishevelled, indeed, but fully dressed, asleep and snoring.

She put out the lamp quietly, and then crept away. Her last hope of his restoration to better things would be, she felt, in allowing him to believe that she had not seen him in his drunken sleep.

CHAPTER X.

THE ORDEAL.

MARY went out early that day. She wanted to buy some trifling things, but she wanted also to be out of the way while Laurence was getting up and trying to pull himself together. She left a message for him, saying she would be back before long; but when she came back he had gone. He had, perhaps, only gone down to Mrs. Church's rooms, Annie said. Mrs. Church's maid had brought a note.

Laurence had, in fact, gone to Mrs. Church's rooms. He had been summoned by her in order that she might implore him not to say anything to his wife; to assure him that it would be a great mistake to let people know that he believed he had cause for jealousy; that people only laughed at a husband who proclaimed his jealousy; that such things were always best kept quiet; that, with a woman of Mrs. Caledon's character, no actual harm could happen—oh, no; she was quite sure of *that*—and that, anyhow, it was all over now, and Roland was going away. Thus she switched the raw with

nettles, and drove the wretched Caledon nearly mad. And all the time his head was racked with the effects of his unwonted debauch. He left her in a burst of passion.

Mary waited and waited through all that long, sad summer day. She was sorry now she had not remained indoors in the morning and had some speech of him before he went out. She would have tried to speak to him sympathetically and tenderly. She had saved him by affection once before; she might save him by affection once again even yet. No matter how long she lives, she will not forget that day.

Laurence came in about nine o'clock in the evening. He was sober, there could be no doubt about that; but he looked wild and ghastly. He repelled her approaches.

"Did you know that I came home drunk this morning—and do you know why?" He did not wait for her answer. "It was because I was driven half mad by what people say about you and Roland Oliver."

"Laurence!" She rose to her feet. "I'll not listen to you."

"Are you in love with him?" Caledon exclaimed, and he clutched her arm.

"Oh, for shame!"

“Did you tell him you were in love with him?”

“The question is an insult—an outrage!”

“Answer it all the same.”

His fury taught her the need of self-control.

“I never did, Laurence,” she answered, quietly.

“You are changed indeed to me when you could think of such a thing.” Then she was turning away in tears of grief, and pain, and shame.

“I must have this settled one way or the other,” he said; “and I will have it settled here, and now. I’ve been tormenting myself all day thinking this out, and now I see my way. Come in here.” He raised the curtains and motioned for her to pass into his bedroom—a room which he also used as a study. She obeyed in silence. He followed her in and let fall the curtain.

“Sit down and write to him—now, at once.”

“Write what to him?”

“What I shall tell you. See—sit there.” He pushed her towards the seat in front of his little desk. She looked at him with pathetically inquiring eyes. She was not afraid—at least, she was not afraid for herself—afraid of any act of violence; but she had a terrible thought that his reason was giving way. In any case, there was no good to be got by refusing to do what he wished. She sat at the desk, and took up a sheet of paper and a pen,

and waited. Her hand did not tremble, but she felt chill and wretched.

“My dear Mr. Oliver——” Laurence began. “No, that won’t do. People on such friendly terms don’t ‘Dear Mister’ and ‘Dear Madam’ each other, do they?”

“I don’t understand you, Laurence.”

“What do you say when you write to him?”

“I have never written to him but once—that first letter—you know of it. Oh, how I wish I had never written it!”

“Yes, it was the beginning of trouble for you,” he said, with a sneer. “When will the end of the trouble come, I wonder, and what will it be? Well, when you wrote that letter, how did you address him?”

“I did not address him. I simply wrote what I had to say.”

“Very good. Then don’t address him now, but simply write what I have to make you say.”

“I will do as you wish, Laurence.”

“So kind of you! Thank you ever so much! Well, write this: ‘I must see you before you go. Come as soon after you get this as you can. I shall wait until you come, and Laurence will be out.’”

She flung down the pen.

“I’ll not write that,” she said, resolutely.

"You shall write as I tell you."

"No; never! I'll not write that. Not if you were to strike me! Not if you were to stab me! Not if you were to kill me!"

"But, for aught you know, I shall be out."

"That doesn't matter. That isn't the question; you know it isn't. I wonder that you could be so foolish, too. Do you really want Mr. Oliver to come here at once?"

"Very much indeed. A good deal depends on it, I can tell you. A good deal depends on it."

"Well, then," she said, composedly, "if I were to write that, he would not come."

"No! Why not, pray?"

"Because he would know either that it was not written by me, or that it was written by me under compulsion. Mr. Oliver is a man of honour, and he knows that I am an honourable woman."

"By Jove, I believe you are right about leaving out that clause!" he said. "It might put him on his guard. See what it is to be a woman, and to understand these things! About the man of honour, and so forth, we shall see presently. We'll leave that out; the rest will do. Now sign the letter. How do you sign yourself to him—'Mary?'"

"I sign myself to him as I sign myself to every one—'Mary Caledon.'"

With a firm hand she wrote the name. Her natural courage was coming back to her aid.

"Now," he said, "call Annie, and let her take that at once to Roland Oliver. Send her in a hansom. Never mind about the eighteenpence; perhaps we shall not miss it."

Mary rang the bell, and gave the letter, the directions, and the money to the little maid, who was so bewildered by the unexpected lavishness in the matter of the hansom cab, that, as she would herself have put it, she did not know whether she was on her head or her heels.

"Now, Laurence," Mary said, quietly, when the girl had left them, "I have done what you wished me to do. Will you tell me what you mean by all this, and why you want to bring Mr. Oliver here in this odd and roundabout way?"

"Oh, yes. I mean to tell you all the why and the wherefore. Listen! I am determined, at any cost, to find out whether you are speaking the truth or not."

The flush of anger came into her face.

"You are my husband," she said, bitterly, "and are privileged to insult me."

"I am your husband, and am privileged to find out whether you are playing me fair or playing me false. Well, I am determined to find it out and be certain, at any cost. I'll not pass such

another night as last night again ; it would be better to be in the infernal regions. So I'll make certain. When *he* comes I'll keep behind this curtain, close to where you are sitting. I'll put your chair in the right place. I shall watch his face and your face as he comes in. I shall hear every word that he says to you, and that you say to him. If I find that you attempt to put him on his guard by the slightest glance, or sign, or sound, I shall know that you have something to conceal, and I shall believe the worst. Now you understand?"

Then in her heart there went out the last lingering, flickering ray of love for him, or trust in him, or hope for him. A moment before, and she was fearing that he was losing his reason ; now it would be a relief if she could think that he had lost it ; that her husband was only a madman, and not an unbelieving and treacherous wretch. But, no ; there he stood — cold, cruel, chuckling softly over his own cleverness and his own artifice. She was no longer alarmed ; she could only feel contempt.

"So," she said, "you are laying this trap for the best benefactor a man ever had ; for the kindest and truest friend you ever had !"

"Trap ! Where's the trap ? My friend is innocent. You are innocent. I am only giving

him and you an opportunity of showing that you are innocent. Traps are set for the guilty."

"What's to come of this ordeal—this test?" she asked, scornfully.

"If I find out that things are all right, then I shall be satisfied, and shall not suspect any more, and we shall be happy once again."

"No," Mary said; "that can never be."

"Oh, yes! Why not? You ought to be very happy to be so readily cleared."

"And look with love and trust again to the husband by whom I was so readily suspected? Oh, no! Try your test, if you will; but you must accept the consequences."

"I'm not afraid. What have I to lose?"

"A wife's love and a wife's trust; if you have not, indeed, lost both already."

There was silence for a moment.

"You have not asked me," he said, "what is to happen in the other event!"

"In what other event?"

"Well, of course, in the event of my having to come to the conclusion that my suspicions were not unfounded."

The pink light flashed up behind the alabaster for a moment, and then went out. Mary turned from him.

"No," she said; "I have not asked, and I don't want to hear. That supposition could have no possible interest for me."

She was raising the curtain, and about to pass into the little sitting-room.

"Stop a moment," he said, roughly. "I am going with you. I only want to put the lamp out. Here, behind the curtain, it must be dark, you know. Now, then, let us go. I don't want to let you out of my sight, out of reach of my touch, for one single second until we have gone through with this. If you are to be cleared, you must be thoroughly cleared, and not a loophole left on which to hang a doubt about underhand communication, don't you know? Putting suspected persons on their guard, don't you know? Such things have been done—and very cleverly done—by women before now, I am told."

Oh, how she despised him! Oh, how could she ever have loved him and trusted him! How could she ever, in those past days, have so completely forgiven him, and put him back again in his place within her heart! Now she saw how futile was all hope for such a nature. Yet in the cloud, the cruel darkness of the present crisis, she began to see her own way.

"Very well," she said. "I shall only sit here

and read." They were now in the little sitting-room. "You can watch all my movements."

"Perhaps you would not mind reading something aloud? We may have to wait some time."

"Very well. What do you wish me to read?"

"Read me," he said, with insulting emphasis, "that passage from *Hamlet* in which he tells how he means to catch the conscience of the king. I'll find you the volume."

He gave her the book; she opened, it and found the place. He stretched himself back in his chair, with his hands clasped behind his head, and he riveted his eyes upon her face. His expression was as that of a tyrant watching the torture of some victim from whom a confession was to be extorted. She felt the rigid, cruel, inquisitorial gaze become almost insupportable. But she would not betray the slightest emotion. She read on and on, not heeding what she read.

Suddenly their door-bell rang, and she started, but quickly recovered herself. It was a low, timid, unassertive sort of a peal, and she felt sure it was not Roland's.

"I see you started," Laurence said, with a triumphant smile; "are you getting frightened at the thought of the ordeal being so near?"

"I have nothing to fear in the ordeal," she

said. "And that's not Mr. Oliver; this must be Annie."

"So you know the very sound of his ring?"

"A visitor never rings like that," was her quiet answer.

Laurence reflected for a moment. The door must be opened by him or by her. There was no one else who would think of opening it. If Mary went down, she might give some secret instructions to Annie—if it was Annie—and forewarn Roland, if it should prove to be Roland. If, carrying out his threat not to take his eyes off her until after the ordeal, he was to make her come down with him, and it should prove to be Roland, or Roland should dash up in a hansom while the door was still open, the whole game would be up. He stood irresolute for a moment, and now it was Mary's turn to watch his face. She knew perfectly well the difficulty which was perplexing him, and in her utter contempt for him there was mixed up a kind of pity.

The timid, unassertive peal was repeated, perhaps half a tone louder this time.

His mind was made up. "I'll go," he said; "you stay there."

So he went and presently came back again.

"It's Annie; and I have told her that the moment

Mr. Oliver comes he is to be shown up here to you. He was not in when she got to his place, but was expected soon. I told her I should very likely be out, and I have left my hat and umbrella in the other room, where she won't see them. Now, then, Mrs. Caledon, let me feel your pulse—I am curious about your state of mind."

A malignant gleam was in his keen, suspicious eyes as he went towards her. "Heaven give strength to my nerves," was her inward prayer. He took her wrist and felt her pulse carefully. Its beat was steady, calm, and strong. She could hear the quick, irregular throb of his. He dropped her hand, almost threw it from him.

"There's nothing in that. I have often heard," he said, "innocence sometimes shakes with nervous fear, and guilt has the nerves of a blacksmith."

Suddenly a long, loud, rattling peal of the bell was heard—the ring of an anxious comer eager to be let in.

"Here he is!" Laurence exclaimed. "Now, Mrs. Caledon, we shall know all. You just sit there, and don't move when he comes in; let him get quite near to you, so that I may see your face and his. Remember!"

"I shall remember all this," she said. The thought came into her mind: "How should I feel

at such a moment, with such a trial before me, if I had anything to be found out?" Now she was absolutely without fear.

Laurence had made his arrangements very cunningly. He set her chair far back in the room on one side of the hearth, where now, of course, no fire was burning. The bedroom, which was also his study, was originally used as a back drawing-room, divided from the front room by folding-doors; Laurence had the folding-doors removed, and their place taken by the more artistic curtains. The wall on either side of the doorway had gone out a little to receive the folding-doors, and now received the curtains. Mary's chair was set close to the curtain at the end of the room farthest from the door by which visitors came in. Laurence had ensconced himself close by in the corner of the study, with the last fold of the curtain just in front of him. He could hear every word spoken to or by Mary; he could, at any convenient moment, peer unseen through by moving the curtains ever so slightly, so as to give himself a glimpse of the faces that were so near to his own.

Mary could not forbear from one little thrust at her craven husband.

"Laurence!" She leaned back.

"Yes, yes ; what is it ? " he asked, in an angry whisper.

"If you let your heart beat like that, he must know that you are there."

He growled, and then was silent. But she knew he was pressing his hands upon his heart.

"Mr. Oliver, ma'am," said Annie, opening the door of the sitting-room ; and Roland entered, anxious, breathless, impatient, full of life, and energy, and sympathy. Oh, what a contrast!

"My dear Mrs. Caledon, so sorry I was out when your maid came ; but I rushed here the moment I got your little letter. No bad news of Laurence, I hope ? He isn't unwell ? "

"No, Mr. Oliver, he's not unwell."

"Oh, well, then ; that's all right. I am always so much afraid of the poor, dear boy having some sort of a relapse ; although Dr. Robson Roose—who has taken, really, no end of pains with him—tells me there is positively nothing wrong with him anywhere."

"Laurence owes so much to you," she said.

"Not a bit of it. He would have done just the same for me if I wanted it, and it were within his power. I know Laurence. Well, you wanted to talk to me about him, that was why you sent for me ? "

“Yes; it was because of him that I sent for you.”

“All right. He is out, I suppose? The maid told me he was.”

Mary said nothing. No doubt he took her silence for acquiescence, and so he went on.

“I am very glad he is not here. I couldn’t talk before him; he wouldn’t like it. I want to tell you frankly—you, the one who loves him best in the world—I want to tell you what I propose to do for him. Some things I propose will require his consent and yours. One thing, at least, I can do in defiance of both of you. In fact, I have done it. I have made him and you joint heirs to the greater part of whatever property I possess.”

“Oh, Mr. Oliver, no, no!”

“Why, I’ve done it,” he said, with a smile, “and neither he, nor you, nor you and he together can undo it. But then, you see, it really doesn’t amount to much after all; for I shall probably live to be eighty years old. Still, as I am going to do a bit of travel, and, probably, even a bit of exploring, and one never can tell what may happen, I thought I should feel more easy in my mind if I knew before anything did happen that the bulk of what I had would go to my two dear friends, and not to Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer.”

Mary could have almost felt it in her heart to be sorry for Laurence, who had to hear all this.

"Mr. Oliver," she said earnestly, "my prayer to Heaven shall be that I, at least, may never come in for this bequest; but you have my heart-felt gratitude all the same."

"Well, that's settled. That is plain sailing. Now we come to what's not quite so plain, but what can be made quite easy and satisfactory to every one, if you and Laurence will only be reasonable and agree."

"Tell me," was all she said. Her heart was now beginning to beat pretty loudly.

"This is my idea. Of course I couldn't go away and leave poor Laurence to fight it out for himself unaided. He isn't even yet nearly well enough and strong enough for that. You see that, don't you?"

"Yes, I see that."

"Well, I know that he wants to be independent, and you want him to be independent, and so do I, Mrs. Caledon—so do I. I don't want my old friend to feel too much under obligation to any human creature—even myself. I have been thinking all that over, and here is my idea. I propose that I shall advance Laurence a trifle of money—a few hundreds—just by way of a loan, with the regular amount of interest attached; and the interest only, not the

principal, to be repaid for the next three years, unless—— Do you understand all this?”

“Oh, yes, I think so. Unless——?”

“Unless Laurence in the meantime should be in a position and should wish to repay it. Now these are my ideas, and I want you to put them to Laurence in the most favourable way you can. For you see it is all very well to say that it is good for a man to be compelled to work hard. So it is, for a man who's strong and indolent; but Laurence is neither. It would have been good for me, I dare say; but it would only make him break down altogether, and, by Jove, Mrs. Caledon, while you and I are to the front we'll not let him break down.”

Mary felt very like breaking down herself.

“I'll tell Laurence,” she began, and then found it hard to get on.

“Yes, tell him, and put it to him nicely. You see, something of the kind must be done. I am delighted to find that you receive my idea so favourably on the whole. Well, I haven't much more to say. Oh, yes, I want to say that we must have a bright little dinner together, you and he and I, before I go, and that we must be awfully happy, and drink a parting toast to our next merry meeting, and then throw the glasses

over our shoulders, so that they may never be profaned by any other toast."

"When are you going?" she asked, in a voice that trembled a little.

"As soon as I can; the day after *that* dinner-party. Let Laurence fix it."

"Where are you going?"

"Egypt, to begin with. I don't know where from that."

"But you will not be very long away?"

"Oh, no; not very long. The time will seem nothing in passing. I shall be back again before you have time to miss me. By the way, another thing I wanted to speak about. You ought to get into other rooms, not in this crowded place, in some quarter where you could have a breath of air; and tell Laurence from me, in case I shouldn't have an opportunity, that I wouldn't have much to say to that little woman below—Lydia Church."

"I confess I don't much like her," Mary said.

"Oh, no; I know her. She is a selfish little woman, and a treacherous little woman, and a mendacious little woman. Why, she began to tell me things about Laurence himself, of which I didn't believe one single word, and I told her so, pretty plainly, and I wouldn't let her go on. Stop—is not that some noise in the other room, behind the curtain?"

Mary certainly thought she had heard a noise as of shuffling or creeping. But it will be readily understood that she was not inclined to allow Roland to turn his attention in that direction, and so she answered a little abruptly that there could be nothing—that it was of no consequence.

“Well, I think I have said all I want to say. Is there anything you want to say to me, Mrs. Caledon?”

“No; except that I am grateful, and that I believe you are the truest friend a man ever had—or a woman either!”

“Thank you,” he said, and he took her hand. “Good night.” Perhaps if he had not been in love with her, if he had not known that he was in love with her, he would have raised her hand to his lips; as it was, he simply took it in his, released it, and went his way.

Mary remained in her chair, silent, half-stupefied. Then she roused herself, and without looking round called: “Laurence!”

There was no answer.

“Laurence!” she called again, almost sharply this second time. Still there was no answer.

She sprang up and threw back the curtain. She could see no one. Then she took the lamp from the sitting-room table and passed between

the curtains, her heart seeming to stand still with the fear that she was about to see some shocking sight. No—there was nothing; Laurence was not there; his hat and umbrella were not there.

She rang the bell and questioned the maid. Yes, Mr. Caledon had gone out only a few minutes before Mr. Oliver went. Annie had thought Mr. Caledon was out all the time, she said; and was surprised when she saw him going down the stairs.

Mary's heart was full to overflowing, but the sudden alarm about Laurence checked the overflow. She soon, however, settled herself down to the conviction that to-night was to be a repetition of last night, and that, stricken with shame and remorse, Laurence would wander about the streets, and perhaps drink, and come home late. Sad and dreary prospect if the nights were often to be like that. But even from this dismal questioning her mind went back to the dear, dearest friend, whose deep, sweet, sympathetic voice seemed to be still sounding in her ear; the friend who was going into exile because she asked him to go—for her sake—and she thought how happy beyond all women will be the one woman he will love and marry, and she prayed to God to bless them both. "And, oh! He will bless them," she said; and then her heart overflowed, and there came a rush of tears.

CHAPTER XI.

LIFE AND DEATH.

WHEN Roland left the house in Agar Street, he wandered down Whitehall and Parliament Street, and then turned off to the Embankment. The light was burning over the Clock Tower in Westminster Palace, the House of Commons was sitting. Roland had never been anything of a politician; but now for the moment it occurred to him that it must be a great thing to merge one's interests, to lose one's individuality in the grand struggle for some political cause in which one had faith, and hope; even to lose one's personal yearnings and disappointments in the mere strife of party. For indeed the poor youth felt much at odds with fortune now. He had been hit hard—very hard—and he could not tell of his wound—could not have the sympathy of any one—could not even admit that he had been wounded. His trouble was so hopeless, that even if the high gods were to give him the power to realise any one wish, however wild, it did not

seem that he could be much the better for that. He could not wish that the wife of his friend should be in love with him—he could not wish that his friend was dead—nor could he even wish the past all blotted out. Oh, no, no—not that—anything but *that*! He could not face the future without the memory of Mary Caledon. The mere thought of her friendship was something to live for.

One special source of satisfaction he found amid all his troubles in the conviction that he had played well his Spartan boy part, and that Mary Caledon knew nothing of what was gnawing at his heart. He felt a little proud of himself for having been able to accomplish that feat; but it was as well, he thought, that he had not to play the part many times more in the near future. He was profoundly disappointed and humiliated by the break-down of his grand scheme for making the Caledons happy. He had not made them happy; and he had made himself very unhappy. He had seen with his own eyes that poor Laurence was deteriorating in character and temper day after day. Mary was right; he had better break off and go away, if only for that reason, and that, alas! was not his only or his chiefest reason. He felt his heart torn with pity for his old friend, whom he had striven so much to help so hopefully at the

beginning. How well it had all begun, and how badly it had turned out! Well, it would be something if he could still, from a distance, be allowed to give them a helping hand. Mary would always feel kindly to him; and perhaps some time he should come back again, and find them prosperous and happy, and they should all be friends and comrades once more.

But not soon, not for a long time. He was determined in his own mind that he would stay away from London until the wound in his heart should be nearly healed. He thought of taking up African exploration; he thought of going to India, and finding something to do there; or going on through China and Japan to Australia, and settling there; or to the United States, and trying what active life was like there. Anyhow, he would bear in mind Mary's injunction, he would not lead an idle existence any more, he would not live in vain.

He did not know how long he had been wandering thus, up and down the Embankment—up and down—until he became conscious that the place was growing silent. Soon he heard the solemn tones of Big Ben clang out with proclamation of midnight. Near Waterloo Bridge he turned on hearing the sound, and he looked up at the Clock

Tower with its plume of fire. All along the benches of the Embankment, and in some places along the stone pavement itself, were creatures huddled up for their night's sleep—creatures who, it must be supposed, had no other bed-chamber accommodation.

"I wonder if the legislators perchance are legislating about *that*," Roland asked himself, stirred for a moment out of his own personal troubles. "I wonder do they ever think about that? This is a great country, we are always telling ourselves. Is it a great country, with that sort of thing going on in every city and town in the land? And that is nothing, oh, nothing at all compared with what one might see every night for the looking in other quarters of London, in some parts of every great town."

He thought of finding some one of the outcasts who was not asleep, and trying to talk with him, and find out what his own individual trouble was, and whether he had any ideas to contribute as to the causes and the meaning of the more general trouble. While he was looking about for an opportunity, a man got up from one of the benches and began to move or stagger slowly, undecidedly, eastward—towards Blackfriars Bridge. He was only some yards ahead of Roland when he started, and Roland would soon have caught up with him,

but that, on coming nearer, he fancied, by the unsteady, swaying movement, that the man was drunk. So Roland slackened his pace and looked after the staggerer. Somehow, it did not seem quite like drunkenness; it was more like weakness or sickness. The night was soft and warm; the moon was covered by clouds; the river was full and swift and was rushing by the Embankment, almost, one might have fancied, within touch of the wayfarer's hand. "What a temptation to suicide—such a full, flowing tide, so easily reached! No desperate, headlong plunge—no deep, dreadful fall—only to lay one's self on the river and be carried away to death!" This was what Roland was thinking—not about himself; he had far too robust and unselfish a nature to dream of escape by death's portal so long as he could be of use on earth to any one or anything. But those unfortunates on the benches and the pavement, this swaying, staggering creature yonder—drunk or sober, it matters not—what a temptation just now to them, to him, to seek a refuge from their hopeless earthly life in that near and swift-flowing river!

Roland had allowed the swaying man to get well ahead of him, and, perhaps, would have turned the other way, but for a sharp cry of despair—for so it sounded—which came suddenly to his ears.

It came from the man he had been following, and who now suddenly stood still and sent out that one unearthly cry. It was not the scream of pain or the yell of anger, but only the heightened and protracted groan which proclaims that all is given up, that all is over. Then, before Roland had time to rush at him and grip him, the unfortunate man scrambled over the low wall and tumbled himself into the river.

Roland ran to the side and looked over just as the splash of the water proclaimed that it had received the victim. He glanced for half a second up the Embankment, and down ; there was no help near at hand. The sleeping wretches on the benches were apparently sleeping still. They would not have heeded the cry, and the river being so high up the bank the splash would not have made much sound. Besides, it was not likely that any of them could be of the slightest use in any case. Roland was waiting to see where the man in the stream would rise to the surface. Nothing was to be done until then. He held his breath ; minutes appeared to go by instead of seconds. He had noticed that the man was of slender build ; he must be very light of weight, and Roland felt little doubt that, with proper care, he could keep him up until help should come.

Roland was a strong, a practised, and a skilful swimmer. He had always loved the exercise; it had been his favourite craft, and he had been trained in many rivers, and got the best experiences of many sea-coasts, and he had saved life more than once, under conditions ever so much more hard and perilous than were around his venture this soft, summer night, in the middle of London. So he waited for the right moment, fearless, and confident. The tide was running to the sea; and of course Roland had rushed at once to a position below the spot, from which the man had flung himself in. There! see! He comes up. A face, and head, and shoulders are positively shot up out of the water. A pale, ghastly face, with eyes that blink wildly out of the river-drops showered down upon them from the drenching hair, a mouth that strives to open and cry out, but is instantly filled, and gagged, and choked by the futile splashing of the clutching hands; and Roland, recognising the face of Laurence Caledon, lets himself drop softly into the water. Softly—as softly as ever he can—he descends, so that he may not splash too much his struggling friend; and just as Laurence is about to sink beneath the surface again, Roland has him firmly gripped by the hair. Things seem so safe

that Roland is almost cheery. "Aha, would you—would you?" he says. "Oh, but you don't, though."

Laurence opens his eyes, and, recognising him, gurgles out: "Oh, Roland, Roland, save me, save me," and he tries to clutch at and cling round the man who would rescue him.

"All right," Roland calls out in encouraging tones, although Laurence drags him for half a moment down under the water, and the cooling Thames gets into his mouth. "Don't cling to me, Laurence, and I'll save you—but—" another drag down—"if you cling to me—you'll—drown us—both." Then Roland shut up, resolutely acknowledging the fact that, as revolutionary orators sometimes say, "the time for talking is past—the time for action is come." Roland's idea of action now was to put a hand under the back of Laurence's head, holding the head firmly, and keeping the face upturned and out of the river, while he swam gently with the other hand, or merely trod water, and peered about him to see whether help was near. This would be plain sailing, easy work, if Laurence would only let himself float and submit to be towed along.

The weather was so warm and soft, that even at midnight the water was not very cold, and

Roland felt sure that long before the chill of the river could have much effect upon either of them, rescue would have come in some way. At first, indeed, he was taking the whole situation rather too easily, not seeing much real danger in it, and only conscious of a vague, wild wonder and gladness that he should have been upon the spot just in time. He was too actively engaged in the present, however, to be able to go back even so short a distance into the past as to wonder why Laurence should have flung himself into the Thames.

Did Roland cry out for help? Indeed he did not. He was up to his business too much; he knew a trick worth two of that. He had no idea of idly wasting his breath—that limited stock of breath which is the imperilled swimmer's main treasure—he had no idea of tearing his lungs with a vague shout addressed to the general public of London. The moment he comes within hail of a ship, or a moored steamer, or a barge, or a pier, or a bridge, it is his resolve to make the welkin ring; but he certainly would not waste a shout; only one who has been in such straits knows the physical cost of a shout. Why, for one thing, it plumps you down under the water the moment you have got it out of your lungs, and Roland could not risk many plumps into the water, considering

the burthen he was bearing. His first idea was to make for one of the iron rings that hang at intervals along the quay-sides of the Embankment, and hold on securely there until help came. And now he saw one clearly a few feet ahead of him, and he and his burthen were only a few feet from the quay. Lifting Laurence's head a little more—Laurence so far had been doing wonderfully well—he struck out a strong, bold stroke, and made for the iron ring. But Laurence suddenly gave a wild scream and clutched at Roland, and clung to him, and they both went down below the surface, and the river raced with them far beyond the point for which Roland had made. Just then the river took a sudden bend, and there was the rush of a current sweeping downward and out; and, when Roland next lifted his head above the water, he saw, the moment he could shake the drops from his eyes, that they were in mid-stream. He lifted Laurence's face above the water again, and tried to shake himself free of the affrighted creature's arms and legs. He cried into Laurence's ear that if he would let go they would be perfectly safe; that if he would not let go they must both be drowned. In vain! Laurence had no ears or senses now. He screamed when he could get his mouth free of water; he clung to Roland; he

cried out: "Oh, Roland! sa', sa'!" which was the best attempt he could make at "Oh, Roland! save me! save me!" He grappled with Roland meantime, fought fiercely with him, and was no more to be shaken off than Victor Hugo's octopus. Probably when he lay so impassive and quiet, on Roland's first seizing him, he had become, for the moment, quite unconscious. But now he had his senses just enough to let loose the passion of fear; not enough to control it.

Roland tried hard to keep his wits about him and to take things coolly; but he felt that the business was getting very serious; his strength must give out in a few moments or seconds more; the end must come soon. He felt his arms relaxing as Laurence's desperate clutch grew tighter and fiercer; there seemed nothing for them but to go down together; and just in that moment came up in his reeling brain the thought that life had been very sweet to him.


But he recalled all his wandering energies in a moment, for he saw some great, dark object bearing down upon them. Then at last he summoned up all his strength of lungs and voice, "and from his lips there burst a mighty cry." But the barge—for a barge it was—dropping rapidly down with the stream, pushed at them heavily, rather than

struck them, with one of her sides, and Roland felt as if they were being sucked down into some vague, cavernous depths of dripping darkness; and then, somehow, the whole story seemed to come to an end for him.

The men in the barge had them out of the river in a moment, and had their dripping clothes off, and rolled them in blankets and rough coats. Roland was, to all appearance, the greater sufferer of the two, for he had been badly hurt by the barge on the head and shoulder. But Roland was strong and full of life, and by early morning he was on his feet again, and ready for anything. Indeed, the moment he became conscious—he had lain for some hours absolutely unconscious—he was ready for anything. The first question he asked was about his friend. Well, the news was bad; the poor gentleman was very weak and exhausted, and seemed not quite conscious like. He kept asking for his wife to be sent for, and saying he had killed his best friend. So they moored the barge, and got in a doctor; and the doctor was very kind, and had him took to a hospital; and very like he would get better there soon.

CHAPTER XII.

LATER ON.

AURENCE did get better—much better—very soon; for he died.

Roland never again saw him alive.

There had just been time to send for Mary Caledon when Laurence recovered his senses enough to be able to give her name and address. She was with him at the end. He left with her a sweeter, tenderer memory of him than she might perhaps have ventured to hope for. He became more like what he was in their early married days before he had yielded to temptation and been soured by deserved disgrace, and made egotistic by ill-health, and bitter and anxious by poverty. He left a message with her for Roland—if Roland should be living—and he told her that if Roland was dead he had died in trying to save the life of an ungrateful and worthless friend.

"Oh, no, no," Mary sobbed as she bent over him. "Not worthless ever, and not ungrateful now." She broke down in tears.

"Thank you, Mary," the dying man said. "I think you are right—not worthless and ungrateful—any more."

Mary never went back to the house in Agar Street. Roland came to her in the hospital where her husband's corpse was still lying, and he took charge of everything for her. And the physician of the hospital found a quiet lodging for her near Regent's Park. There she will try to add a little to her little income by writing; her needs would not be great. It seems almost superfluous to say that Roland did not offer to give her any help in the way of money. But he had all the Agar Street things sold off for her, and that gave her a little sum to start with.

He did not ask her why Laurence had tried to drown himself, and she did not tell him then. She gave him so much of Laurence's message as was expressive of Laurence's gratitude; but the rest she kept to herself—for the time. Only for the time, however. She will think it right to tell him all—later on,

Later on ! Many things may happen later on, of which there is no speech or even thought with these two just now. Roland will go abroad—that seems to him best ; but he will return—later on.

THE END

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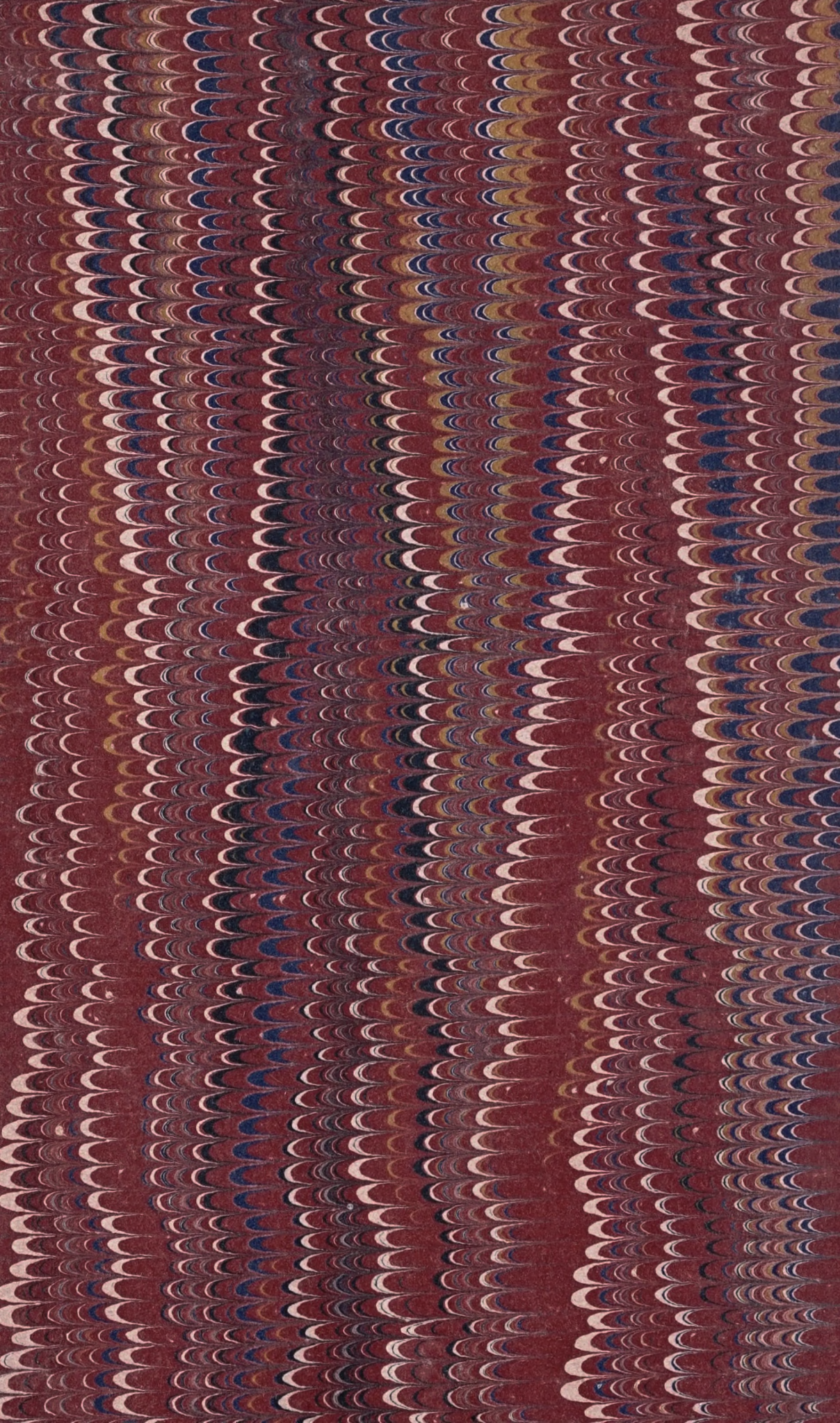
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